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Chapter 0 – Demondal

A refreshing breeze blew over the rolling grassy plains. The blue sky was covered with many fluffy clouds that lazed along. Some rough-looking horsemen stood out in contrast to this picturesque scenery. There were ten of them. The two in the lead were different from the other eight. They wore the same leather cloaks and rode what appeared to be the same breed of dark brown horses. Only one of them had a rather heavy looking bag fastened to their saddle, but the rest of their equipment was roughly the same. The remaining eight on the other hand, looked terrible. They rode a variety of breeds of horses. Their equipment consisted of leather armor and worn out cloth, otherwise they were half-naked. Their weapons too, were but simple bows or bone spears and if not, then rust-covered swords. Although their gear was poor and lacked equality, all eight shared a glint of desire in their eyes.

The distance between the two fleeing horsemen and the eight horsemen in pursuit grew closer by the moment.

“Don’t let them escape! After them!”

“Get them!”

“Cut them off!”

The eight horsemen in pursuit raised their weapons and shouted vulgar slang with some jeers occasionally mixed in. Judging by their equipment and personalities, without a doubt “Highwaymen” or “Brigands” suited them. However, in contrast with their rough appearances, their coordination was magnificent. The two horsemen on the run seemed to be driven on as the other eight formed a fan shape. Each rider maintained a set distance from each other, and in the blink of an eye they were already half surrounded.

“Fire!”

The man wearing leather armor in front of the group raised his spear and shouted. It appeared that he was the leader of the brigands. Following his orders, the pair of archers on each flank nocked arrows in their simple short bows.

On the right flank, a man with a tattooed face shouted, “Fuck you!!!”

Using that as their signal, the other three also drew their bowstrings taut and simultaneously loosed their arrows. The arrows whistled slightly in the air. Whether the two fleeing horsemen heard it, or looked back by chance, they immediately changed course, cleverly maneuvering their horses to dodge the arrows, one after another.

The abilities of the pursuers with the bow, and the abilities of the pursued with handling their horses. The difference in those abilities was clear. The two horsemen’s goal was to let them waste their arrows.

“…tch. Aim for the one on the right!”

The leader clicked his tongue and gave his orders. All at once they focused on the single rider on the right. From the start, the one on the right had the large leather bag attached to the saddle. His movements were slower than the one on the left. The horseman under the concentrated fire earnestly dodged the incoming arrows. However, the severity

of the barrage only intensified, and then suddenly an arrow struck its mark.

“!!”

The horse with the arrow stabbed in its rear end whinnied and wildly tumbled to the ground. The leather bag attached to the saddle spilled opened and bottles filled with a blue liquid scattered across the ground.

The rider seemingly jumped off of his saddle right beforehand. He stretched out his legs, having learned how to properly fall, and was left almost completely unharmed.

“One of ‘em is down!”

“Hyahaa! Kill him!”

The brigands spurred their horses on to ferocious speeds.

“Haahahaha, dieee!”

A cruel smile crept over the brigand leader’s face as he stuck out his spear and charged straight at his scrambling prey. The sharp spearhead emitted a fiendish light.

In the face of the approaching spear the unsaddled horseman had jumped to his feet and threw his cloak into the air. He then turned his back on the brigands and started to run at full speed.

The brigand leader sneered, clearly thinking that he was an idiot. Even with his speed, he couldn’t outrun a horse.

The distance between them closed in the blink of an eye. The brigand leader mercilessly stabbed at the defenseless back of the escaping prey. The honed spearhead easily caught the cloak, piercing through it.

However, it was light. Too light. The cloak wrapped itself around the spear since it met no resistance. He realized all too late. At that moment, the horse the brigand leader was riding let out a whinny out of pain, before falling forward.

He was tumbling.

The brigand leader, unable to keep himself in his saddle, was flung forward and slammed into the ground on his back. “Gue-!” He let out a cry of pain due to the impact.

The spear fell from his hand, but he paid it no heed as he quickly stood up, unsheathing the sword at his waist.

The horse he had been riding but a moment ago was writhing in agony with its fore-left leg cut off.

In the very next moment, a black shadow fell upon him. The brigand leader, having seen the true form of his enemy, opened his eyes wide with fright.

“Y-You’re!”

He trembled as the black shadow silently ignored him and held his saber at his side. The whole time the shadow’s blue eyes were narrowed. The shadow was a young boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He could probably be mistaken for a girl with his small stature. He had fearless, sharp blue eyes. He kept his long blonde hair in a ponytail on the back side of his head as to keep it from getting in the way. Readied in his right hand was a plain and simple saber. Although, the words that would fit him best would be —

Completely black.

On his forehead was a black iron forehead protector, his face up to his nose was covered by a black scarf, he wore black leather gauntlets and black leather shin-guards. His body was wrapped entirely in black cloth. On his belt was

a sheathed black dagger, and on his back was the black scabbard of his saber. That appearance was undoubtedly a —

"–『Ninja』!" groaned the brigand leader.

"Ninja".

Although he wasn't a true Japanese "Ninja". He was more of a foreigner's embellished idea of a 『Ninja』.

"Ninja! Andrei the Ninja!?"

"Holy shit!! He's the real one!?"

"In just that moment he switched himself for his cloak…!"

The rest of the brigands began to tremble as well.

Andrei the Ninja.

Within this world he was among the most prominent, and his skills and appearance lived up to his reputation.

In the face of the powerful Andrei, his underlings shook in fear, but the brigand leader ignored them. The waves of shock subsided and were slowly replaced by the feeling of his blood boiling. It was his fighting spirit. He wanted to trade blows with someone strong. He wanted to test his power. It was a pure desire.

"…I've wanted to try ya once ya know…!"

His frightened expression was replaced by a ferocious smile. He readied his longsword, aiming the tip at Andrei's head. At the same time, Andrei became a black blur. Then came a flash of silver and the sound of the air being cut. He knew he'd been cut. The brigand leader tried to let out a dumbfounded "Wha-?" Then he realized something.

He couldn't speak. In his peripheral vision he could see the red blood spraying from his own neck. His vocal chords had most likely been destroyed. His carotid had also been cut to pieces. The attack was a quick and clean one shot, one kill.

The still-dumbfounded brigand leader simply mouthed his surprise. He received a 『Bleed Out Death』message and fell to the ground like a doll. Just like that, he wordlessly became a 『Corpse』.

"B-Boss!"

"You asshole, you dare-?!"

Two of the brigands flew into a rage rather than freezing in fear. They leaned into their horses and charged at Andrei. The two brigands specialized in long handled weapons such as spears and clubs. They charged at full speed and tried to surround him.

Andrei readied his saber in his left hand, and pulled out his black dagger with the other.

"Take thiisss–!"

"Dieeeeeeeeeee–!"

Both of the underlings raised their weapons as they charged forward. At first glance, Andrei was in a dire situation. However, he himself was calm. He knew he wasn't alone.

Crack! The sound of what sounded like a branch snapping echoed through the air.

“What was that?” said the scraggly bearded, spear wielding brigand. With a puzzled expression he turned to look behind him.

Something was whistling through the air. In the next moment, the scraggly bearded brigand’s head was sent flying. Like a fountain, blood spurted out from his neck. It was undoubtedly 『Instant Death』. He lost all strength and became a 『Corpse』, slowly slumping forward until he tumbled from his horse.

Only someone with strengthened kinetic vision would have been able to witness it. From far behind an arrow came flying and pierced the brigand’s neck, ripping it to shreds.

“The hell?!”

The brigand galloping at Andrei with his club raised, couldn’t help but stop his horse after witnessing his partner’s death. He looked behind him, trying to figure out what happened. A cloak fluttered and one cavalryman could be seen. It was the horseman that had been fleeing with Andrei.

He wore subtly ornamented leather armor with a decorative feather on his helmet. The lower half of his face was hidden by a cloth. The brigand was only barely able to make out the young boy’s black eyes. At his waist was a single saber, but what stood out was the vermillion colored bow in his left hand.

The compound bow was slightly larger than what would normally be used on horseback, and it also gave off a strange presence.

The vermillion color stood out against the green grass-covered plain and the sunlight glinted attractively off of the bow’s elegant curve.

One of the brigands shouted, “—Kill him!” and the rest of the dumbfounded brigands quickly regained their senses.

However, it was all too late. The black-eyed boy had already nocked another arrow. In one breath, he drew his bow and loosed his arrow from atop his galloping horse. Crack! The arrow shot like a silver beam straight for the brigand as he groaned.

The deep sound of hitting flesh resounded as if it were coming from within his core.

The club wielding brigand that was facing off against Andrei was blown off his horse as if he’d been shoved. Sticking out of the left side of his chest was a white feathered arrow. The club wielding brigand fell to the ground with a thud. It had accurately struck his heart with a critical hit. The club wielding brigand could only drop his gaze, dumbfounded by the arrow that pierced his leather armor with ease.

“Shit…!

Muttered the brigand before the last of his HP ran out and he became a 『Corpse』.

“You bastard, what tremendous skill!”

“It’s not just his skill, that bow is dangerous!”

Among the restless brigands, one with heavy metal plated leather armor shouted with vigor, “Okay, leave it to me!” as he put up his wooden buckler. Then as he charged in he yelled, “Bring it, you fucking archer–!!”

He repeatedly smacked his buckler with his mace as if he were saying something like *‘Just try it!’*

“…”

The black-eyed boy slightly narrowed his eyes and drew his bow as far as it could go.

A silver light glinted off the arrow as it flew true with tremendous speed at the brigand with the shield. Even though the arrow was too quick to be seen, the brigand knew it was there because it was coming straight at him. He smiled viciously as he was already prepared to take the shot with his shield.

Crack.

The arrow smashed the shield to pieces, without losing any force it pierced through to the other side. His metal plated leather armor was stabbed through as if it were made of paper.

“Oh…!”

The combined force of the arrow and the charging brigand caused him to be launched like a billiard ball. As his blood sprayed in a wonderful arc through the air, he struck the ground. Without as much as a twitch, it was an 『Instant Death』.

The now rider-less horse continued to gallop on. Its hooves echoed as it continued to gallop past the black-eyed boy.

“…They got James–!”

“Shit, that archer is too much!”

“This isn’t good, let’s run–!”

Between the limitless power of the bow and its somewhat inhuman wielder, the brigands completely lost their will to fight. They leaned into their horses and began running away at full speed.

The black-eyed boy brought his horse to a gallop and began to leisurely attack. The brigands ran in random zig-zig patterns in order to avoid being targeted.

But, it was all in vain.

A twang rang out two, three times. The silver of the arrows flashed, and one after another the brigands were shot down. Just like that, three of the brigands were shot to death. However, the last one was a little luckier. Even though he took a direct hit, because it hit his shoulder it wasn’t an instant kill. His figure gradually disappeared as he ran on toward the hills.

“…”

The boy stopped his horse on a small hill, not wanting to chase the brigand too far. With an arrow still nocked, he looked around at his surroundings.

To the east lay green, rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Occasionally the sound of the wind rustling the leaves carried over.

To the west was an impressive mountain range so tall that it became slightly hazy. A forest spread across the base of the mountain. Just in front the forest, the small figure of the brigand shot in the shoulder could be seen desperately running away. He continued to get smaller in the keen eyes of the boy as the brigand ran on and on.

The boy remained on guard for another ten seconds or so. After determining that there were no more enemies and no one lying in ambush, he returned to where Andrei waited.

“…”

Andrei knelt beside his dark brown horse, and hung his head. The horse was in pain from the arrow in its rear end.

“…Are you okay?” the boy asked in perfect, fluent English. He laid his bow across his legs and returned the arrow to his quiver.

Andrei snapped his head up and bitterly shouted, “Like hell I’m alright!!” He also spoke English, but his Russian accent slipped in as he had some difficulty pronouncing the ‘R’. “Look! Just look at this! It’s terrible!” He stood up angrily and made exaggerated gestures toward all the scattered bottles.

The bottles were scattered about the soft grass, perhaps due to the impact, most of them were broken. Hardly any whole bottles could be seen. Most of the blue liquid they once held had since leaked out.

“The 『High Potions』went to waste! Almost… almost all of them, you know! Even though I got them so cheap! ‘Urvan’ isn’t even all that far away! Terrible, this is just terrible! Now… now I’m way in the red aren’t I…”

While speaking Andrei gradually lost steam until he broke down sobbing and fell back down onto his knees.

Even while the black-eyed boy looked at him pitifully, he shook his head slightly in disappointment.

“…. I even told you not to get greedy. It’s like this because you were greedy and tried to bring the whole lot all at once.”

“But, buuut!”

“At the very least, if you hadn’t overloaded your horse, we could’ve gotten away. Am I wrong?”

“Ngh…”

Andrei had no comeback for any of the facts the boy listed. The one who refused to acknowledge the boy’s warning and forced him to load on a large amount of potions was none other than himself.

“…. Rather, if you had just used your bow from the start, they might’ve retreated! Why didn’t you attack any sooner?!”

Andrei stood up, knowing he was in a bad situation he made exaggerated gestures and tried to change the point of interest.

“Hey, hey, who’s the one being paid to be a bodyguard?”

“Ngh-“

“Think about it, have you ever heard of the client protecting the bodyguard?”

“Gu-“

“You should be grateful that I didn’t just leave you behind in the first place. If I had, I would have easily gotten away without any risk.”

“Gununu-“

After receiving such a counter Andrei groaned with a vexed expression.

He opened his mouth as if to respond, but as he was in no place to argue, he just sank to his knees.

“Seriously, saying that I’m the one that requested a bodyguard. But just how many times have I thought of leaving you? I’m carrying valuables as it is…”

The black-eyed boy muttered to himself while patting the bow on his lap.

“Kuh… shit, Kei, this is your fault! All because you had to request a bodyguard! I thought that was a rare opportunity, but I was wrong to accept it! If I had refused then I could’ve gone on without ever touching these potions! Damn it! Damn it…”

Andrei seemingly spit out the words with resignation as he once again calmed down. His strength seemed to have given out and he fell down with a thud. Then he started quietly playing with the ground with his finger.

He was just throwing a fit. The black-eyed boy named Kei sighed.

While looking far behind them, toward the grand mountain range view, Kei muttered in Japanese, “Not like I care…”

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Chapter 1 – Kei

About twenty years ago there was a revolution in computer science. Information processing techniques took a huge leap forward. With developments in human biology, virtual reality, namely VR, was implemented ten years ago.

Currently, the world is filled with applications with various content for VR. One such application was the Northern Europe developers' VRMMORPG,『Demondal』. It was a realistic middle-ages fantasy type of MMORPG.

The game used the world's most prominent physics engine. All areas were Free PvP, and a player that dies drops all of their current items at the place of death (including their corpse). Players' actions did not unlock different abilities. Typical game elements such as player names, HP bars, so forth and so on, were missing. It felt rather cutting edge.

According to the developing company, "We strived for the utmost limits of a fantastic reality."

The line 『Demondal』proudly draws between itself and other VR games that focused heavily on game elements is its unimpeded VR simulation experience making it practically a real life simulator.

The in-game menu only contained three options: 『Logout』,『Call GM』, and『Real World Time』. It should be easily understood just how realistic they were aiming for.

However, VR games that pursue the most realism are sadly, not accepted by everybody. 『Demondal』is a good example of that.

Unlike other games the severity of the system, specifically the combat, item creation, and no passive abilities, was too difficult for a typical person.

All in-game actions are plain, real life actions. Moreover, compared to other games it had a steep learning curve.

『Demondal』's active player count numbers a little over 20,000.

When considering that other online VR games have at least 50,000 active players, the disparity becomes apparent.

However, the 'heroes', the oddballs, the cripples, and other unfortunates who seek out such a severe and real 『World』gather indiscriminately from all corners of the world. They gather in the world's toughest VRMMO, 『Demondal』.

Nogawake Iichi, better known as Kei in 『Demondal』is also one of the hopeless gamers that love that rotten world.

As Kei galloped on his horse he held his bow single-handed and said to Andrei, who was following him, "…Even so, those guys from earlier sure had a lot of energy."

It had already been about ten minutes since they repelled the brigands. The surrounding area changed from luscious hills to trees to sparse woods of varying trees. It was proof that they were approaching Kei's stronghold, "Urvan".

They would reach Urvan in another twenty minutes.

“You’re right…. They were probably separate characters for roleplaying.” Andrei agreed. He sounded a little down, perhaps still depressed from the loss of the potions.

Unlike the sulking Andrei, Andrei’s horse walked lightly after being freed from its heavy load and fully healed by a potion.

Andrei sighed then shook his head as if trying to shake off the gloom and then continued, “At the very least, their coordination wasn’t nooby. That level of coordination takes quite a bit of practice.”

“Yeah, their teamwork was admirable. If their archers had been better, we would’ve been in trouble.”

“Anyhow, after the leader died they lost all coordination.” Andrei then frowned under his scarf and tilted his head slightly in puzzlement. “…You know, they knew about me, but not about you? Are they from a different game?”

The number one for “Ninja” style, and moreover one of the few saber wielders, Andrei was extraordinarily well-known. Kei wasn’t as popular as him, but was a reasonably well-known player regardless.

He would be logged in for so long that people were saying, “Isn’t he just living in this game?” One could say that he may as well have been a cripple. At a glance he was a battle maniac and master of mounted archery. What’s more is that he was one of 『Demondal』’s few known Japanese players.

“No, it was most likely *this* thing’s fault.” In his left hand Kei held out the splendid vermillion composite bow.

In the world of 『Demondal』 all items a player is carrying are dropped at the place of death. Running into thieves and brigands that are after such drops are an everyday occurrence.

For that reason, most players reinforce cheap practical armor. Players that use high class or even unique items regularly are extremely limited.

Kei was no exception. Both his weapons and his armor were usually slightly inferior to high grade equipment.

His favorite bow was large and especially hard to handle while on horseback, but in return it had good power and range. It was a strange longbow for mounted archers, but it was Kei’s trademark.

However, today’s circumstances were different.

The vermillion composite bow.

A Wyvern’s wing tendon and a branch of an Elder Treant; two extremely valuable materials are used to make it. In 『Demondal』 there is no other bow that can compete with its power.

Kei requested this bow be made by a competent bow craftsman, and it had finally been finished. He had only just retrieved this gem from the seaside town “Kitene”.

Its name was inscribed as 『Dragon Stinger』.

The size was a little large for mounted archery, but it was smaller than what Kei was accustomed to. Using the bow wasn’t a problem for him. Although, the draw strength of the bow was so high that other longbows couldn’t even compare.

Of course, both the power and range were far from normal too.

At the practice range『Dragon Stinger』's arrow completely pierced through both sides of plate metal armor from 200 meters away.

So logically, within a 200 meter radius, it could even pierce『Dragon Scales』, which boasted the highest defense in the game. Hence the name, 『Dragon Stinger』.

This one of a kind extraordinarily powerful, beautiful vermillion bow would likely overtake the longbow as Kei's new trademark.

By the way, Kei still had materials left over. If he felt like it, he could make another two of these bows. Even while taking into account that it may be stolen, he could wield it without worry. So that was another reason why 『Dragon Stinger』 was a good bow to use.

"His wooden shield was pretty shabby, but breaking it to pieces and even piercing through his armor was funny. That bow is pretty amazing."

"Yup, yup."

It's not like Kei had made it himself, but he was pleased that Andrei complimented it openly.

"As expected of Jap the Reaper… A suitable weapon for a death god, wouldn't you agree?"

"…"

At Andrei's teasing Kei suddenly turned gloomy.

"Jap the Reaper". Out of Kei's many nicknames it was most likely the best known.

The nickname stemmed from the famous murderer Jack the Reaper. Those who fought with Kei rarely survived, thus the name was given to him.

Kei was able to use powerful longbows from horseback with ease. He was leagues above other players in ability. Gauging the wind was a talent of his. His accuracy was unparalleled. Second-rate armor couldn't stop his arrows, assuring his prey would die.

Thus, he became known as "Jap the Reaper".

He happened to be Japanese, so they changed it from Jack the Reaper to Jap the Reaper.

No one can say for sure who started it, but because of its simplicity it spread like wildfire, erasing his first nicknames like "Stinger", "Large Archer", and others. More recently he was starting to be called, "The Jap". The ones calling him so didn't mean it in a bad way *that* much, but as a Japanese person being called "Jap" over and over didn't feel very good.

"…I wish I'd have a different nickname already," Kei murmured a distant wish.

"Yeahhh. A new nickname would be nice."

Andrei somewhat nonchalantly agreed from behind with his arms folded.

Truthfully, since Kei got his hands on 『Dragon Stinger』 the fatality rate of those who fought with him would increase ever more.

If he walked around with this bow regularly, the number of people aiming to steal from him would also rise. In other

words, the number of victims will continue to rise.

Andrei secretly thought to himself, *Won't the Reaper nickname just spread even further?*

Another ten minutes passed as they galloped on. After passing through the sparse woods they followed a small river upstream.

Directly in front of them, between the tall bare cliff sides lay the entrance to a gorge. The gorge was known as "Urvan Valley".

It was a very convenient road that led toward the player-made village "Urvan". If they continued through the valley and up the path along the cliff, they should reach the village in a matter of minutes, except–

"…Fog?"

Kei knitted his brow in suspicion and pulled on the reins to stop his horse.

Fog.

The road that stretched from the gorge entrance to the other end faded completely into the white fog. The fog was thick as if milk mixed with the air, blocking their view.

Kei muttered, "…Something feels off."

"Yeah. The weather isn't bad," responded Andrei, looking up at the clear sky.

In the realistic 『Demondal』, the weather is also reproduced. The phenomenon known as fog isn't all that uncommon. But *because* the game is so realistic, it was incomprehensible as to why there would be fog now.

Andrei faced Kei and suggested, "…『Illusionary Fog』?"

Kei denied the idea with a shake of his head. "No, I don't think so. Think about our magic resistance."

"…It shouldn't be this thick for us, huh."

"Yeah, at the very least, this can't be player-made. My sixth sense isn't reacting either," said Kei while carefully observing their surroundings.

『Sixth Sense』. One of the few game elements in the realistic 『Demondal』. To the Japanese, describing it as "bloodlust" would make it the easiest to understand. Simply put, it is a system where he would get the "chills" if he felt someone intending to attack him.

General illusions that don't cause any real harm are also considered "attacks".

"If your sixth sense isn't reacting… then this isn't a magician's doing."

Andrei brought his hand to his chin and hummed in thought.

Putting aside Kei fighting from long distances, he exceled at sensing bloodlust through 『Passive Sense』 as well as suppressing his own bloodlust through 『Stealth Sense』.

Even without the god-like passive ability to sense an attack from even the slightest bit of bloodlust, he could generally deal with surprise attacks. In return for being overly sensitive to bloodlust, it was hard to handle stimulating free-for-alls.

In any case, even Kei didn't feel any bloodlust coming from the fog.

"Well, if it's a contract with something other than a fairy then it's a different story…. For argument's sake, if it were a spell with no menace nor hostility then even I wouldn't be able to feel it." Kei drew an arrow from his quiver as he asked, "Do you feel anything, Andrei?"

"Nope. You know that I'm no good with passives. If you don't understand it then there's no way I would."

Andrei drew his saber from the scabbard on his back and shrugged his shoulders.

Other than using a saber for hand-to-hand combat, Andrei was a ninja who also excelled at sabotage, ambushes, and the like. His 『Offensive Sense』which overwhelms his opponent with bloodlust is the extreme opposite of its bloodlust suppressing friend, 『Stealth Sense』.

Andrei who mixes up the "Active" and "Stealth" abilities alongside his sword, toys with his enemies in an ever-changing manner. He could cut through the very root of the battle's rhythm and dominate the atmosphere.

But because this fighting style takes the initiative, Andrei didn't have many opportunities to use "Passives". Furthermore, his ability to sense bloodlust is limited to meager levels.

Meaning, it's only for *top-class players*. His ability at least wasn't comparable to that of Kei's.

"But, even so, I get that this fog is blatantly suspicious."

"Agreed. What should we do about it?"

As far as Kei knew, there hasn't been any occurrence of fog in Urvan Valley before. Including days with poor weather.

Although there have been events, items, new monsters or small story related updates that have been added without prior notification.

They thought that this fog might also part of something new.

"…Taking a detour would be the safest choice."

Andrei said in an incredulous voice, "It'll take another 30 minutes if we do, you know?"

The only other way to get to Urvan would be to go around the cliff and then climb up the steep mountain road.

"Then let's just charge through?"

"Kei… Why do you gotta be so extreme?"

"How many adventures have you been on? You're saying that even though you want to do it?"

"Heh, pretty much. I've got nothing to fear now that I've lost most of my potions!"

Andrei proudly stuck his chest out masochistically, but tilted his head and said, "But is it all right? In the worst case, that bow…"

"Of course I don't want to lose it, but I have the materials for another. Besides, the next time something bad happens I'm going to leave you behind and run."

"You ass," joked Andrei as he raised his saber. A smile floated onto Kei's face and he pretended to run away on his horse.

“Well, let’s check it out a little, partner.”

“Let’s.”

The two entered the fog with smiles.

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2. Inside the Fog

It was a milky white world as far as they could see.

“It’s so thick…”

While slowly moving forward on their horses, Kei had his bow readied to fire an arrow at any given time. The atmosphere around them was filled with tension.

Thanks to the sunlight pouring down from overhead it wasn’t dark, but the world around them grew hazy. Things didn’t look too good.

It was difficult to see about five meters ahead of them, and they could hardly see anything ten meters away. The silhouettes of many trees appeared suddenly from the milky white veil startling Kei repeatedly.

Each and every particle looked detailed to the point of illusion. Even their heads felt dizzy due to the hazy world. It was an unpleasant sensation.

“Andrei, you following?”

“Yup. I lose you sometimes though.”

“…Don’t get lost.”

“I’ll be careful. That would be a pain anyway.”

Is he really okay? Kei thought and looked toward Andrei who followed closely behind him. Andrei looked at the surrounding area with interest as he swayed atop his horse with his saber bumping against his shoulder.

“This fog is something else, ain’t it? I’ve never seen anything like this, even in reality.”

“…Is fog common in your country?”

“Uhhh… No. Not much fog, but it’s always snowing instead.”

“Russia, right?”

“Yeah, I’m in Siberia.”

“Huh, Siberia… sounds cold.”

“Our winter hits minus 30 Celsius on a good day.”

“No thanks. I’m no good with the cold.”

They stopped talking for a moment.

“…Think it’s a spell after all? It feels like it’s too thick to be natural.”

“Yeaahh. But even if a mob used a spell, it would have hostility, right? In that case, then your 『Sixth Sense』 should react.”

“Which means, it has no threat… No, accounting for our magic resistance, this density shouldn’t have zero threat.”

“It could be real fog rather than 『Illusionary』 too, ya know?”

“…If so, then it’d have to be a pretty high ranking spirit. It’d be a good deal if we made a contract with it… But fighting with just the two of us doesn’t sound very appealing.”

“…I hope it’s not an aggressive type.”

Andrei took up a pose of hopelessness. Suddenly, his face stiffened with shock and he pulled out a throwing knife from behind him with his left hand.

“…”

“What’s up, Andrei?”

In a flash Kei felt Andrei’s sharp bloodlust and he stopped his horse, readying his bow as he looked for the cause.

Andrei wore a baffled expression while holding the throwing knife in his left hand. He sighed as he said, “…I heard a voice.”

“…A voice?” Kei frowned unintentionally.

Kei’s ears weren’t as good as eyes with the『Enhanced Sight』 crest etched in them both, but as an avatar with the highest possible stats they were remarkably sensitive.

But he didn’t hear any voices.

“…What… what was that just now…”

“…Calm down. Something feels off.”

Like a broken machine, Andrei looked around restlessly. The inexplicably nervous Kei was perplexed at the words he himself had spoken.

Something feels off—

He wanted to push away such ridiculousness with a laugh.

There certainly was the system of getting the chills, 『Sixth Sense』, in 『Demondal』, but it only reproduces a goose-bumpy kind of feel.

It shouldn’t have actually made him feel uneasy. It shouldn’t have directly affected his emotions.

The fact is, right now Kei was struck by the feeling of something unbeknownst to him crawling up from below his feet.

“…Andrei, I didn’t hear any voices.”

“That’s impossible! There… It’s there again!”

With a slightly panicked expression, Andrei said in a shrill voice, “You can hear it too, can’t you?!”

“…No, I don’t hear anything.”

He truly didn’t hear anything. However, clearly this wasn’t the case for Andrei.

“Liar! Why are you lying?!”

“I’m not, just calm down.”

“Why can’t you hear it?! There, aga—”

Suddenly, as Andrei was trying to speak, his eyes opened wide and he went stiff.

“…”

“…Andrei?”

“…Who’s there?!”

Andrei looked around with his saber raised and screamed, “Who’s there?! Where are you?!”

“Andrei!”

“Who?! Why, why—“ With an expression filled with fear Andrei screamed, “—why the hell do you know my name?!”

“…What?” *The heck is this guy talking about,* thought Kei for a moment.

“…Andrei, just calm down would y—“

Andrei spun and faced Kei.

At that moment, a bead of cold sweat ran down Kei’s back.

Andrei was looking straight *through* him.

His eyes were clearly not focused on Kei. Andrei’s face was as white as a ghost, and he was as expressionless as a noh mask[1]. Having a top game’s avatar had no effect on the very real chill that ran down Kei’s back as if something repulsive were there.

“…”

Without a word, Andrei raised his left hand overhead. The throwing knife glinted.

Kei had the illusion that Andrei’s black clothes swelled up, “Wa—, hold up a sec.”

His left arm blurred.

Kei felt Andrei’s sharp bloodlust hit him like a knife. In a panic Kei stooped over. The knife whistled as it cut through the air, the silver knife barely grazing his head.

“Hey! Quit screwin’ around, Andrei!!”

He unintentionally yelled angrily, but Andrei paid no heed and kept looking around suspiciously.

“Fuck, where. The hell did he g— aahhhh, ah, ah, ah, disappear, disappear.”

While he seemed to be muttering incoherently, he sat on his horse and hugged his arms to his chest, perhaps because the cold chilled him. His body shivered lightly like someone with hypothermia.

At the height of Kei’s worry he nimbly slipped off of his saddle and tried to approach Andrei.

At that exact moment, Andrei suddenly stopped shivering and pulled another throwing knife from behind his back.

Here it comes, Kei thought, preparing himself for the hit. But Andrei turned the complete opposite way.

“There!”

Andrei threw the knife and it whistled through the air.

Of course a knife that is thrown at nothing wouldn’t hit anything. It disappeared into the milky-white veil.

Normally, one would expect to hear the knife stick into the ground, or bounce off of the cliff side, or some sort of noise. But, the world inside the fog was eerily quiet.

“Again, again, it’s gone…”

Andrei hung his head and looked like he was about to cry.

Kei sympathized with him, and then in the midst of this ridiculous situation he remembered his anger. Unable to hold back, he mustered his strength and shouted from his diaphragm, “Hey, Andrei! Get it together!!”

Startled by the voice Andrei raised his head.

“…Kei!!”

Andrei shouted back, but he *turned around*.

—There’s no way that Kei was over that way.

“Kei! Where did you go?!”

Andrei heaved a somewhat relieved sigh.

“Seriously, scaring me like that…”

“Yeah, that’s right. I heard some strange voice earlier.”

“No, it wasn’t a hallucination. It really was real.”

“Forget about that, where did you go? I got pretty scared, ya know?”

“Huh? You were here the whole time? Liar. There’s no way you were here.”

Andrei laughed loudly.

—This isn’t a joke.

“Hey… Hey!! Andrei!!!”

The sight of Andrei enjoying a conversation with only himself made Kei’s hair stand on end.

“Just *who* are you talking to?!”

Andrei whipped around and looked his way. Andrei’s eyes weren’t focused.

“…Hey, did you hear that voice just now?”

Andrei looked around. “Hey, Kei… Kei?”

Andrei turned around again and let out a confused, “Huh?”

“Hey, where the hell did you go this time, Kei! Would you quit screwing around?!”

“You’re the one that’s screwing around! I’m right here!”

“…! Over there!”

While looking in the wrong direction Andrei gripped the reins and spurred his horse. The horse whinnied and took off running.

“Keiiii! Waaiit!”

“No! *That* isn’t me! Stop, Andrei!!” Kei screamed desperately, “Andrei!!!”

The fog engulfed Andrei.

Kei could still hear the sound of hooves moving farther and farther away— and then they were gone.

“…”

Kei could only stand dumbfounded and alone.

“…!”

After a few seconds, or maybe longer, he suddenly regained his senses.

I have to go after him, he thought.

However, it felt wrong. In this strange, unknown situation Kei wanted to log out or change to a different character.

But, Andrei would never leave Kei in this kind of situation.

Kei had a hunch that something was definitely wrong.

“Shit, that idiot.”

While cursing Andrei for causing so much trouble, Kei pulled the reins of his horse and tried to get on.

“…?”

But the reins didn't budge.

Kei tilted his head and followed the reins up with his eyes.

"…Mikazuki? What's wrong?"

While saying its name, Kei felt something was off and turned to face his favorite horse.

Still gripping the reins Kei looked at the horse's— Mikazuki's face. Mikazuki looked like it had been stuffed, it didn't so much as twitch.

"…Heey, Mikazuki?"

Kei waved his hand in front of Mikazuki's face. Usually, a pet would follow its owner's movements by moving either its eyes or head. However, Mikazuki kept staring perfectly straight without a hint of movement.

"…What's going on?"

Maybe it's a bug? Kei sighed. *I should have logged off after all.*

I really want to get out of here—

"Bururu."

Just as he was thinking such things, Mikazuki snorted and shook its head, almost like a computer restarting because of an error.

"Oh, you're back. Good."

"Bururu, bururu." Ignoring Kei as he sighed in relief, Mikazuki snorted.

"Bururu, bururu, bururururu."

Kei realized something was wrong right away.

"Bururururu, bururururururu."

Mikazuki shook its head up and down as it continued to snort.

"Bururururururururururururururururururu—"

The shaking got so violent toward the end that it blurred as if it were a broken toy. Its neighing sounded like the roar of an engine.

"…Mi-Mikazuki?"

Kei timidly reached his hand out to the blur of a head.

Just before Kei's hand reached its head, Mikazuki suddenly stopped shaking.

"…"

Mikazuki stared directly at Kei and it opened its mouth, "Mi–Ka–Zu–Ki–I."

Kei's deep voice cracked, "What?!"

Startled, he reflexively tried to jump backwards, but tripped over himself and fell on his butt.

“…”

It didn’t make sense. Still dumbfounded, Kei’s mouth was hanging opening like an idiot. He couldn’t even speak.

Normally, pets don’t talk.

That much is a given. It’s a horse after all.

It wouldn’t speak, it couldn’t speak.

At least, that’s how it should have been.

“…”

Directly across from him, Mikazuki’s seemingly lifeless head fixed its eyes on Kei.

Its beady, marble-like eyes continued to stare at Kei without moving. Kei’s head started to spin. It felt like the inside of his mouth was drying up. That delusion assaulted Kei.

“…Bururu.” Just how much time had passed?

Once again, Mikazuki snorted and suddenly averted its gaze. Just like that it turned and left its owner, Kei, and galloped into the fog.

The sound of hooves gradually faded away into the distance until eventually, Kei could no longer hear them.

Silence.

“…”

Taken aback Kei was left all alone.

A loud noise escaped his throat.

Kei hoarsely gasped for breath. He only realized just now that he’d been holding his breath.

For a little while he just sat there and took shallow breaths.

In the tranquil world of fog, Kei’s gasping and wheezing echoed, faded, and then disappeared.

“…Calm down… Calm down, calm down…”

He muttered quietly to himself.

Kei changed positions to sit cross-legged, and with his hand on his chest he took slow, deep breaths.

Finally, when his heartbeat slowed down he let out a big sigh. Kei pressed his finger tips to his brows like he was trying to fight a headache.

He meditated for a few seconds.

“…Calm.”

Kei decided to run away from this situation. It didn’t feel right, it was just too much.

With a pale face, Kei tried to open the menu window through the game’s mental interface.

If this were the same as always he wouldn’t put much thought into it and it would execute. But this time it didn’t work.

However many times he tried to open it, the window just wouldn’t pop up.

“…Why won’t it pop up?” He whispered.

If I can’t log out… Then －

Suddenly, such thoughts flooded his head.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down his back.

No one else was here.

He was all alone in the fog.

His skin gradually grew hot, but his core grew cold.

“…Shit. Why won’t this just work.” While he muttered irritably he shook his head and tried the mental interface. Failed. Again. Failed. Again.

Failed.

“…Argh!!”

Just as his frustration and irritation was about to reach the breaking point, a semi-transparent window silently appeared before his eyes.

Like always the Real World Time, GM Call, and Logout options all appeared on the sterile white window.

He tried moving the cursor with his eyes, and as if all the irregularities up until now had been a lie, the menu showed full functionality.

It was as if everything was normal.

“…Thank god.”

After seeing it in working order, Kei sighed in relief.

Truthfully, the situation was entirely too weird. *Maybe I got mixed up in some psychic phenomenon.*

These foolish feelings swelled up inside him, it couldn’t be helped.

“…Even though this is just a game.”

Putting up a strong front, Kei let out a snort of amusement as he reached out and pushed the 『Logout』 button.

At that exact moment a voice came from right behind him, “No-Ka-Wa Ke-I-I-Chi.”

The deep voice cracked and carried such intense bloodlust that it would make one’s stomach churn.

“!??”

Why his real name? The ominous voice? The tremendous bloodlust? Without understanding what was going on, Kei rolled to an upright position and kicked the ground hard to gain some distance. As he turned around he readied his bow, nocked an arrow, and drew back the bowstring.

But then he froze.

Somebody was there.

Its skin was practically as pale as that of a corpse.

For some reason, it was completely naked. No, could it be called naked if it had no genitals? Its body was smooth almost like an alien.

There wasn’t a single hair on its head. Even though it had a humanoid body, calling it human would be a stretch.

It lacked any sort of facial features.

The only feature was the two black holes where its eyes should have been.

“—“

For just a moment when his thoughts went blank, a genuine question ran through Kei’s mind,

The hell is with this guy?

Just then, the place where the humanoid’s mouth should have been suddenly ripped open, “Yo-N-Ta.”

Kei’s head started to spin.

He fell to his knees with a thump.

Kei lost consciousness.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

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3.

Kei absentmindedly dreamed.

A dream of playing outside with a friend from his childhood.

It looked innocent and fun.

Maybe it was tag. His younger self ran around.

Just like sand it smoothly melted away until it disappeared.

A white room.

From the window he could see a bird flapping away with outstretched wings.

He merely followed the bird's flight in the clear sky with his eyes.

Atop the clean bed, he laid motionless. Entirely motionless.

He gently closed his eyes.

Everything was dyed blue.

The world ebbed and surged with a light blue hue.

It wasn't hard to breathe.

That's just how things were.

He wasn't even scared.

He was sinking. Sinking into himself.

Deeper and deeper—

— He continued walking for what felt like a while.

Directly in front of him was a mirror.

A mirror that didn't reflect anything.

No, he could see something if he focused his eyes.

Black hair and black eyes rose to the surface.

Subtly ornamented leather armor.

A feathered headpiece.

A single saber next to a quiver on someone's hip.

And a vermillion bow in his left hand.

"…It's me."

His murmured words resonated clearly.

As soon as he recognized it, the form became clear.

Kei.

So he had once named himself.

Up to now, his two selves lived alongside one another.

"…My… body."

He made a fist and squeezed.

His hand steadily unclenching and relaxing. The blood coursing through his veins. The tingling of his nerves to all his extremities.

He firmly felt it all.

Before he knew it, the mirror disappeared before his eyes.

In its place was a long path stretching on.

Somehow his surroundings felt lively.

A horse prancing about energetically.

A girl wearing a robe of feathers.

It was almost like a revolving lantern.

The illusions of shadows whispered to no one in particular, "Let's go."

And Kei took the first step forward.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] Revolving lantern: A lantern that spins and casts different colors of light and shadows based on the design. (Best explained with a video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmhn5u55Exs)

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4. Andrei

“—Kei! Keii!”

Someone was yelling.

“Get up! Hey, Kei! Get up already!”

Kei’s ears complained about the incessant noise as he lolled from the person shaking him.

Kei remembered this kind of discomfort.

It was nostalgic somehow.

It felt similar to when he was younger and got very seasick from riding on a ship.

“…Knock it off, don’t shake me.”

While moaning and fighting off the nausea he opened his eyes a little.

“You’re awake!”

The world he was thrust into was dyed orange; it was probably the sunset colored sky. Then there was the person worriedly looking down on him; a black shadow.

Blonde hair and blue eyes. A black iron head guard and black clothes that enshrouded the figure.

It was a “Ninja”.

“…Where are we?”

Realizing that he was lying down on his back Kei slowly sat up. He looked around. The grassy plains were dyed vermillion.

Turning around, a huge, rugged, rocky mountain stood towering above the surroundings.

Putting aside the grassy plains, Kei had no recollection of this mountain.

“…Where the heck is this?” Kei muttered quietly, his thoughts still hazy as if he’d just woken up in the morning.

“The hell if I know!” With a thick Russian accent the ninja replied in English, “Before I realized it I was here… B-but look at this! This! It shouldn’t be like this!”

The ninja spoke as he pulled out the grass right at his feet and showed Kei. The dirt clinging to the roots broke off in little bits and fell to the ground.

“…What the?”

No way.

Kei’s absentminded expression suddenly became alert. Wide-eyed in surprise, Kei also reached out for the grass in front of him.

He carelessly ripped it up.

He could feel the light tearing of the fibers on his fingertips. The smell of grass mixed with dirt distinctly filled his nose. Kei tried licking the grass juices stuck to his fingers.

Of course, it was bitter.

“…This can’t be.”

The grass, ripped to pieces in his hand, didn’t even disappear.

His five senses all conveyed its existence.

Even each individual speck of dirt could be made out.

“See?! Strange, right?!” The ninja wore a desperate expression as he pressed Kei a little hard for an answer.

“Y-yeah.” Kei nodded.

Even though 『Demondal』boasted the world’s fastest physics engine, there were substantial restrictions on interactions with game objects such as dirt and plants.

That was because if the system tried to calculate the movements of all the small pieces, then data processing would become too much of a burden and would fall behind.

Therefore, only specific items within the game are exceptions. Dirt and plants are set as 『Non-Interactable Objects』which are also known as 『Indestructible Objects』.

—At least, they should have been.

What happened to that?

Right now, the ripped up pieces of grass in Kei’s hand were certainly there.

Some of the grass in his palm blew away with the plain’s breeze.

The sound of grass rustling came with the earthy smell of grass and dirt.

The grass twirled and danced in the wind. Dumbfounded, Kei just followed it with his eyes.

He raised his gaze to the deep-red dyed rocky mountain. The rock face seemed to twinkle here and there. Some of the exposed minerals reflected the light of the setting sun.

Looking up further, the evening sky hung overhead.

The slowly changing clouds couldn’t have been any reused graphics.

Somehow it had become very real.

More overwhelmingly real than ever before.

It was too overwhelming, there was too much to take in.

—Yes, it was almost like it was…

“Reality…”

No way, he denied that explanation right off the bat.

If this was reality… Then just what was this body?

This bracer and leather armor and this saber as well. Even the vermillion bow at his feet; all of it belonged to “Kei”.

The ninja’s voice shook as he said, “…The menu screen won’t come up. No matter how many times I try it.” He clenched his fists like he was trying to endure something unpleasant and stared at the ground.

“…”

Bewildered, Kei looked at the ninja.

It was an important piece of information that the menu wouldn’t appear. But, the person covered in black clothes only added to Kei’s confusion.

“…? W-what’s wrong, Kei?”

The ninja became aware of Kei’s silent, cold gaze as Kei observed him as one would a stranger.

“Um, you know—” Kei tried to speak but then kept quiet.

He hesitated for a short while.

“…The heck, what’s wrong?”

“U-uum.”

Resolving himself Kei asked, “Who… are you?”

“…Hah?”

What in the world is this guy talking about, thought the ninja.

Taken aback, the ninja said obliviously, “—Hey, did the shock knock something loose in your head? Gimme a break, Kei! It’s not like I don’t understand though.”

He sure got me, was written all over the ninja’s face. He lightly tapped his forehead and said, “Andrei! Andrei the Ninja! …Don’t tell me you forgot or something?”

Like a puppy abandoned on a rainy day Andrei, filled with anxiety, faced Kei.

Andrei.

That was the answer he was expecting.

Well, that much is to be expected.

That's not it. That's not what I really meant, Kei thought and knitted his brow.

To begin with, calling him "Kei" so casually, furthermore, covered entirely in black and a sabre on his back; only one person that Kei knew fit the description.

Rather, out of all the 『Demondal』 players only one person fits the description.

But, even so.

The ninja in front of him wasn't the "Andrei" that he knew.

There was just one *difference* between them.

"…Okay, 'Andrei'."

Kei raised his head and sternly looked directly at him.

"W-what is it?"

"Well, I don't want you to get the wrong impression."

"Sure."

"There's just one thing that I want to ask."

"…What is it?"

"This is just for reassurance, you know? That is…"

"…"

"It's a little hard to say…"

"…Quit beating around the bush, spit it out!"

It wasn't like Kei to be so indirect or to say "Andrei" the way he did.

Still bewildered Kei nervously asked, "…Why are you… a *girl*?"

"…Huh?" She stupidly spoke for the second time. "Andrei" froze up.

"…What are you talking about?"

"No, well, you see…"

Following where Kei pointed, "Andrei" looked down.

It was her chest.

Or more accurately—the *bulges* on her chest.

She made a strange sounding, "…Wha?" 'Andrei's' eye's widened. "Eh? Why? Eh?"

Sort of timidly, "Andrei" grabbed her own respectable chest.

Munyu, munyu[1].

"…I-I have boobs," she muttered in a daze. And then with a small gasp she looked like she just realized something. Just like that she reached her hand between her legs.

Mozo, mozo[2].

"…I-it's not there." Something. *Something* was there. "…Why?"

"How should I know?"

The cosplaying ninja was a *girl*.

In reality, starting a fire with a flint isn't very hard.

If there were some well-rubbed out hemp cloth, dried kindling, and a striker to top it off, there wouldn't be a problem. As long as the correct process was followed even a child could easily make a surprisingly large fire.

Firstly, hold the kindling and the flint in one hand. Then with the striker in the other hand strike down against the flint. If the sparks land on the kindling, then wrap it with the hemp cloth and blow air into it while lightly shaking.

White smoke should rise, and after another ten seconds or so, once a flame begins to burn, the fire is started.

Before the fire goes out, the last thing is to feed the fire with twigs or dried leaves that were set aside beforehand.

"There, all done."

The heat of the flames felt comforting. Satisfied, Kei nodded.

He put the flint set into the pouch on his waist. While rubbing his hands together he looked up overhead.

"…It cooled down, huh."

The sky became gloomy as it continued to get darker. The sun had already sunk beyond the horizon and the stars began to twinkle.

He looked out over the plains, near the rocky mountain.

Kei continued to set up camp in the shadow of a large, egg-shaped rock.

The flickering flames eating at the firewood caused the rock to cast a long shadow.

The occasional strong gust of wind presaged the chilling night to come.

Kei gathered the items in front of the leather cloak and sighed in relief.

"…All right then," he said from the opposite side of the fire.

Andrei sat lightly on top of a flat rock, taking in the warmth of the fire.

Kei faced *her* and smiled awkwardly. “Are you cold, *Princess*?”

“…Stop it with the princess,” her thick Russian accent slipped into her English “R” pronunciation.

Disheartened, ‘Andrei’—rather, the blonde girl cosplaying a ninja—replied to Kei’s teasing. “…Also, I’m not really cold,” she murmured with a slightly discontent expression as she averted her eyes.

Even with just her thin black clothes and leather cloak she didn’t appear to be bothered by the cold, nor did she seem to be putting up a strong front.

Come to think of it, she is Russian, thought Kei.

On top of that she lived in Siberia, which has intense winters. She probably didn’t even consider this to be “cold”. Convinced, he replied with, “Okay. Then it’s all good.”

“…”

For a while, it was quiet.

There was only the soft sound of the fire crackling.

Both parties wanted to talk about something, but neither side knew what to say.

The atmosphere held a tense feel of hesitation.

The fire began to quickly burn the firewood during their silence. They tossed in more firewood.

Any longer than this would just be a waste of time. With that thought, Kei slowly opened his mouth. “…Hey, don’t you think it’s about time we talked?”

“Hm. Yeah, I suppose so.”

“…Are you actually ‘Andrei’?” He once again asked the girl on top of the rock.

She sat hugging her knees to her chest and looking down.

“Aah, it’s that. I am ‘Andrei’,” she affirmed, speaking slowly.

“Then that would mean you were actually a woman using a male character this entire time, right?”

“Yes, that’s how it is.”

“Uhuh…”

Hearing that, Kei let a deep sigh escape from his lips.

In the game, Kei met Andrei the ninja about two years ago.

Andrei was the one who approached Kei in the start. She was genuinely into ninjas, so Kei being Japanese tickled her interest and then she made contact with him.

Since then, because they were both solo players and got along well, they continued to hang out together. However— “To think you were a woman, huh.”

It had never even crossed his mind that the person on the other side could actually be a woman.

—He did, however, think he was an effeminate guy.

“But, why did you intentionally make a male character?”

“I thought that since female characters have less physical strength, choosing a male character was the better way to go for being a ninja.”

“I suppose so.”

It’s rare nowadays for games like 『Demondal』 to have distinct differences in abilities between genders.

Basically, male characters have generally higher physical capabilities. In return, female characters have deft hands; but it is harder for them to improve their physical strength.

In short, if one wanted a pure fighting character, then choosing a male character would give them a clear advantage. Female characters, essentially, are great with craftsmanship, but some crafts such as carpentry require strength, so female characters can’t be said to be fit for all manufacturing jobs.

Of course, depending on the character’s race and lineage, a female character could have a high disposition to magic, among other things. The fact is that there is a feel of vague inequality.

Those discrepancies from avatar to avatar had incited much debate within the game. But, one could say that 『Demondal』’s choice to commit itself fully to realism instead of warping things and forcing a clumsy vision of equality on the world was quite in tune with its philosophy.

To be fair, male characters have their weak points too.

If hit between the legs they take a large amount of damage and have a high chance of being stunned. By the way, this applies to male humanoid monsters as well.

“The other reason is that nothing good would come of me saying I was a woman. Therefore I kept quiet.”

“I see. You were always popular as the other ‘Andrei’. If people found out that you were a woman then it’d be even more troublesome for you…”

“…Could you cut it out,” she replied, with a sad look.

The story of the handsome—or rather, aesthetic ‘Andrei’ who had strong support from friends, and even had a fan club—was well-known throughout 『Demondal』.

It seemed to have been troubling her, but instead of disappearing and making a new character, she appeared to have become somewhat used to it and reluctantly kept going.

“…Even if you say that…”

While staring at the blond female ninja before him, he said calmly, “It does feel weird to be calling you Andrei while you look like this after all…”

With a somber expression she replied, “…Aileen.”

“Hm?”

“Aileen. That’s my real name.”

She looked up and looked Kei in the eye.

“Aileen… huh.”

Her blue eyes stared back at him.

She had a small, delicate figure and a tall, thin nose.

She was reminiscent of a feline, looking up at him.

Her long, gorgeous blond hair was kept tied up to keep it from getting in the way.

Looking at her like this, she kind of looks like ‘Andrei’… No, ‘Andrei’ is the one that looks like ‘Aileen’. She must’ve subconsciously added traces of herself when making her character, Kei thought.

Aileen started to blush and looked away, “…Don’t stare so much.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“Hey… what about you?”

“…What do you mean what about me?”

“Like your name or something.”

“Oh. My name is Keiichi. Keiichi.” He picked up a stick and wrote “KEIICHI” in the ground.

“Keichi?”

“Umm, it’s a little off. It’s Keiichi.”

“Ke-i-chi.”

“Just saying it slower doesn’t fix it. Ke-i-i-chi.”

“Kye-ii-chi.”

“Ha—something like that.”

“…It’s hard to say. I like just ‘Kei’ better.” In one go Aileen rejected his actual name.

Continuing the pronunciation of an extended vowel like in “Keiichi” must be difficult for foreigners , thought Kei.

“I’m fine with just ‘Kei’. Just call me whatever is easiest.”

But he held back from saying that he was called Kei in real life too.

He looked down at the fire and silence fell once again.

He wanted to talk about something, but he couldn’t get his thoughts in order.

While gazing at the flicking flames he thought that whatever happens, happens.

It felt good to just not think.

Looking up, Aileen was spacing out while massaging both of her calves.

The light of the fire reflected off of Aileen's glossy blond hair. She quickly looked up, catching Kei's gaze.

"…Your face didn't change at all, Kei… I suppose it was always like that?" She questioned, looking a little hesitant, but it seemed she couldn't hold off her curiosity.

"My face, huh…" He rubbed his cheeks.

He tried using the dagger on his hip as a replacement for a mirror, but it wasn't as reflective as he expected, so he could only see a hazy image.

Regardless, if Aileen said that it hadn't changed then it probably hadn't changed. It's probably still 'Kei's' face from inside the game.

However, when he was asked if that was his face in reality he replied, "…I don't know. Even in real life it's been years since I've looked in a mirror," he muttered with a distant look in his eyes.

Aileen's face stiffened in surprise, "Eh?"

"Jap the Reaper", Kei the archer.

He was the one known as Kei, whose marksmanship earned him the nickname of "Jap the Reaper" and he was also famous for being the most prominent player.

Even from Aileen's partially obsessed perspective, Kei's obsession was on another level. There hasn't been a single time when she logged in that Kei wasn't on. The rumors that he even stays logged in for twenty-four hours straight may not be an exaggeration, she thought vaguely.

"I-I see…" Her smile twitched and her eyes darted left and right.

Aileen immediately started acting suspiciously and Kei unintentionally showed a bitter smile.

…Well, of course she'd be like that.

She pulled back from Kei's unpleasant expression.

That aside, she was disturbed. Sympathizing with his *situation* felt like stepping on a major land mine.

Kei didn't care much about what she thought of him… but a regular person would probably feel bad.

Although getting all this out of the way now might have been pretty good, Kei thought to himself.

At any rate, considering the current situation, they couldn't avoid the topic any longer.

"Aileen."

"Hn! W-what is it?"

"I think it's about time we got around to the topic at hand."

"Y-yeah." In response to the serious atmosphere, her expression hardened and she fixed her posture.

“…”

He started to break the ice, “You don’t need to be that serious about it.” Kei unintentionally burst out laughing at her unusual reticence and timidity. As if it were contagious, Aileen too laughed a little.

It held no real meaning, but they laughed together before Kei finished up with, “Sorry about that.”

“And so, the main topic is our current situation.”

“…Where is here. Also, why are were here, right?”

“Exactly.”

This makes things fast.

Without needing to say much, it seemed that Kei wasn’t alone in thinking about such things.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] Munyu, munyu: A squishing kind of noise.
[2] Mozo, mozo: A rubbing noise.

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5. Antique

A single rocky mountain towered over the grassy plains. In its shade a young boy and girl talked with one another.

“Our situation, huh,” Aileen muttered while she traced her pink lips with the tip of her finger.

“It’s a unique situation so I can’t really say much, but I can think of a couple reasons, I think.”

“Okay, go ahead. I’ll do you the honor of listening.”

“Can it.”

It seemed like Aileen had regained ‘Andrei’s’ energy once more.

It was enough for Kei. Smiling, he held up one finger, “Well, it isn’t anything that special. Firstly, we are still players inside 『Demondal』.” He held up a second finger, “And secondly, for some reason we were thrown out of the game and are now in a different place.”

“Well, that sounds about right.”

“See? Nothing special. But that’s as far as my imagination can go.”

“Really?” She chuckled smugly, “I happen to know a third possibility.”

“Oh? Speak if you so desire.”

Aileen smirked knowingly and held up three fingers. “Third. I fell asleep while playing 『Demondal』 and all of this is just a dream.”

“…I see. It’s possible, but an unexpectedly straightforward idea.”

“Hey, what do you mean by unexpected?!”

Kei nodded while going, “Hm, hm.”

Aileen looked a little upset, but didn’t actually seem to mind it much.

It was possible that it was all just a dream.

With the sensation of the light and warmth of the fire, a thought crossed his mind. *Have I ever felt a dream this real?*

But compared to the second possibility that he brought up, hers was much more plausible.

To test whether or not it was really a dream, Kei relied on a classic method.

“Yah!”

“…What are you doing?”

“Am’t hyou tell? I’m pimching mai heek. (Can’t you tell? I’m pinching my cheek.)”

He used all his might. This was the true power of his high strength.

“…Hm. That really hurt. But I didn’t wake up, therefor this is not a dream. Q.E.D.[1]”

He moved his hand from his bright red right cheek and wore a very serious look as he said, "…At the very least, this isn't *my* dream. That was already made clear though, huh."

Amazed, Aileen concluded, *If this is a dream then it wouldn't have hurt*, she thought regrettably and drew a throwing knife from behind her back.

Kei asked in a surprised voice, "Woah, you're going to use a knife?"

Aileen methodically rolled up her sleeve, as if she were going to inject a needle.

"Well. A long time ago I pinched my cheeks in a dream and still didn't wake up. If I don't at least go this far, we may never know."

"No, no, no, if you're worried about power then I can do it for you. It hurts you know?"

Looking at the bruise forming on Kei's right cheek, she quietly refused, "…No, it's fine. I'll handle this." She muttered meekly, "Besides, getting hurt again…" and moved to push the knife into the inside of her arm. But…

"What's wrong?"

She just motionlessly stared at her arm. "It's… it's nothing."

She didn't look like she was afraid, but she gently unrolled her sleeve and instead removed her left-hand glove and immediately let the knife creep across her palm.

"…"

"…So?"

"It seriously hurts. It's even bleeding." Drip, drip. Red drops fell from Aileen's hand. "Well now, aren't we in trouble, Kei? This means that it's impossible for this to be a dream."

"Well, I did think that this probably wasn't a dream in the first place… That aside, are you okay? You cut yourself

pretty deep.”

“Y-yeah… Honestly, it cut my skin easier than expected. It’s probably a good thing I didn’t cut my arm instead.”

The cut on Aileen’s palm was several centimeters long. It hurt just looking at the straight cut ooze blood.

“Wait a second, I should have some bandages somewhere.”

“It’s all right. I want to try a potion.”

Kei reached toward the bag that hung at his hip, but Aileen stopped him and faced the darkness behind the rock and clicked her tongue.

In the shadow of the large egg-shaped rock two horses were laying down on the soft grass.

They were Kei’s horse, “Mikazuki” and Aileen’s horse, “Sasuke”.

Sasuke heard Aileen clicking her tongue and raised its head as if saying, ‘You called?’ and looked at her with its cute, round eyes.

When Aileen woke up in the plains, Sasuke was supposedly laying down and leisurely grazing. After a little she realized that it was just her and her horse in the plains. Kei was nowhere to be seen. At first, she was quite shocked, but Mikazuki came gallantly cantering toward her before apparently guiding her to the rocky mountain where Kei lay unconscious.

In a way, Kei and Aileen owed Mikazuki a heavy debt. But the person(?)[2] himself seemed to practically not care and left it at that. Even now, he continued to munch on the grass without even acknowledging Aileen.

Aileen met Sasuke halfway and pulled a High Potion out of the leather bag attached to its saddle.

“Now, let’s see how this goes shall we? If it were a game then I should feel bubbly and be healed in an instant…”

Aileen returned to the campfire and sat down on top of the flat rock again before skillfully pulling out the cork one-

handed. She gently tipped the bottle over her palm. Rather intrigued, Kei came over to watch.

A viscous light blue liquid trickled onto the wound. Then—

Tsssss!! It sounded like meat sizzling after being thrown onto a hot stove. The wound began to foam.

“Vonya—!!!”

Aileen jumped up and made a weird sound, “Vonya—!!!” The potion flew out of her hand, and Kei caught it in an instant. It was missing the stopper so a little of the liquid spilled out. “AHH—! ~~~!!!”

Her screams strained her voice. When she finished she silently held down her wounded hand with the other in agony. The level of her pain was extremely abnormal.

Kei got up and walked over to her, “Hey, you okay?” He hesitated for a moment before slowly rubbing her back.

It looked extremely painful when Aileen cut her hand with the knife, but part of it may have been his imagination. The way the potion bubbled on the wound closely resembled disinfecting something with hydrogen peroxide. The in-game potions that Kei knew would make a nice and refreshing sound when applied and the wound would be healed.

Ten or so seconds passed.

Cold sweat ran down Aileen’s back and she was breathing hard. Kei rubbed her back and asked, “…Have you calmed down?”

“…Yeah.”

“So, what did it feel like?”

“Awful. It hurt like hell.”

“Anyone could see that. I’m asking about the wound.”

“O-oh.”

She timidly opened her hand. “It’s healed, but…”

“…There’s still a scar.”

“Yeah…”

The wound had closed, but a white line stood out on the new skin.

When one hears “potion”, what comes to mind is a complete recovery without any scars being left behind.

The atmosphere around them was very delicate.

“…Well, it’s not too bad. Your hand is better, right? It doesn’t even stand out much.”

“Y-you’re right.”

“It doesn’t still hurt, does it?”

“No, it feels like the skin is stretching a little, but it’s not a problem… I suppose I cut a little too deep,” Aileen grumbled quietly as she clenched and opened her left hand repeatedly.

Leaving her side, Kei sat down on the opposite side of the fire again and curiously looked over the potion in his hand.

“…I wonder what would happen if someone drank this.”

“It’d recover their stamina,” she gave an anticlimactic reply to Kei’s muttering, “…Probably.”

"…"

"Don't look at me like I'll do it!"

"Aileen. You're a doer, I believe in you."

"I'm no guinea pig!"

"Che."

"No, not 'Che'! Enough with the human experiments!"

Kei sighed audibly, "What a spineless person…"

"I've already done my part, now it's your turn!"

While she was justified saying something like, 'You should be the one to test it,' Kei took a sip of the "poison".

"…"

He only drank a little of the potion, but made a bitter face. Aileen looked somewhat excited and asked, "How is it?"

"Hm… Honestly, I can't tell if I feel any different. My body feels somewhat warmer, particularly my hands and feet. Also, my butt hurt from sitting on the rock, but it's more comfortable now. It might have even done something for my lower back pain or stiff shoulders."

"Is this some sort of old man's review on an herbal remedy?! No, it's not! Well, that part is important too, but…! The taste, what does it taste like?!"

“…It’s a lot like the licorice samples from old VR shops. Aside from the sweetness, I think if mint and ginger were mashed together then it would taste like this? Also, it’s a little bitter. I don’t know why, but for some reason it’s sort of carbonated. It was bubbly the moment it touched my tongue. What’s going on with this thing being both carbonated and thick?”

“Just hearing about it makes it seem bad.”

“Yeah. It tastes bad. Awfully bad.”

Moreover, it was the type that left a long lasting bad aftertaste in the back of his mouth. Still wearing a bitter expression, Kei replaced the stopper on the potion bottle.

Aileen trembled with fear and prepared herself, but Kei’s ‘Why don’t you try it?’ never came. The potion was so bad that he didn’t even feel like teasing her.

Kei played with the potion bottle and slowly began to speak, “…Now then, Aileen.”

Aileen sensed the change in atmosphere and let out a small sigh. “…Are we finished with messing around now?”

“Yeah. Sadly, we should take this seriously or it could be bad.”

It had become entirely dark out. Kei looked up at the night sky with a serious expression.”

“Aileen. I just realized it, but I found an important clue as to where we are.”

“Since when? Well, what is it?”

“It’s that,” Kei indicated above him. “『Hasuniiru』, 『Waadona』, 『Niruda』,” as if he was tracing the sky he moved his finger along, “『Domina』, 『Kashinaato』, and lastly『Iarishin』.”

They seemed to be names of some kind.

Aileen tilted her head slightly, “…What are you talking about?”

Kei gave a clear and concise reply, “The stars.” He looked into the far off distance, at the countless twinkling stars and planets and elaborated, “The constellations… the positions of the stars are exactly how they were in 『Demondal』.”

Aileen reflexively looked up at the night sky. But even if she looked at the entire star filled sky, it was just a “starry sky”. She had absolutely no clue what the differences were between the starry skies in 『Demondal』and Earth.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. That green star over there is called 『Hasuniiru』. It’s the center of the『Great Sword』constellation. The red star next to it, 『Waadona』, and the orange stars around it form the 『Mysterious Talisman』 constellation. 『Niruda』, the blue star over there, forms the ‘Wand of Protection’ constellation if you connect it in a straight line with the other–”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Enough of it… But why do you know so much about it? I haven’t seen anything about constellations on the official forums or even the wikis.”

While Aileen might be saying that, she may have just overlooked it because it didn’t really interest her. She focused on the starry sky.

“That’s to be expected. I only heard about it from a hidden quest. I probably don’t know as much about the constellations or the reasons behind them–in other words ‘Astrology’, as the magicians do.”

“‘Astrology’? Rather, what’s up with the hidden quest?”

“You know the woods just north of 『Dariya Prairie』 near 『Urvan』, right? On the far side of the woods an old woman NPC lives in a small cabin. If you cure her lower back pains with either a potion or medicinal herbs, she teaches you about astrology as thanks. In actuality, it seems like events and weather are linked to the stars. In the game, my weather predictions were fairly accurate.”

“What!!”

Thinking back, Kei’s weather forecasts were usually right. She thought that he surely predicted it based off the

direction the wind was blowing and the clouds. To think that the stars held such a secret.

“How cruel of you, Kei! Why didn’t you tell me about this?!”

In the face of Aileen’s rage, Kei wore an utterly surprised expression, “I tried to though? But you just refused and said, ‘I’m not interested’, you know?”

“Eh?”

Aileen froze up involuntarily. She frantically searched her memories, but she couldn’t recall a single time they talked about astrology in her two years with Kei.

“…Really? I don’t remember that.”

“I think it was about a year ago. At the pub in Urvan I said to you, ‘Hey Andrei, do you want to hear about the law of the mysterious stars? The truth about this vast universe is yours to uncover.’ Then you told me, ‘Not interested in that stuff, try someone else.’”

“That’s obviously your fault!! What are you, the founder of a new religion?! Yeah, it was that time. I remember now. I thought that it was just another one of your hard to understand ramblings, so I ignored it, dammit!” She cursed at him while scratching her head roughly. She sighed, “Well, whatever. And so?”

“…I,” Kei hesitated for a moment. Then he clearly said, “I think that, maybe, this place really is 『Demondal』.”

“…Sounds like another breakthrough. So, something here is so similar to 『Demondal』that this may be a parallel world?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“…I’m pretty sure this happened in a recent anime. While playing the game the characters were sent into the game world. Did you see that one too?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t really know much about anime.”

“Heh, it’s weird that a Russian knows more about anime than a Japanese. Oh well. After that, the game world became reality for them. I think that maybe… we’re like those players. If you think about it, having a major update that would drastically improve performance and at the same time cause the system to malfunction, preventing us from logging out… It’s quite possible.” Aileen then said with an earnest expression that, of course, she still wasn’t satisfied with much of the explanation.

Rather than disagreeing with Kei’s opinion, she brought it up for the sake of the argument.

“I’ve thought about that too. However, Aileen, *because it is realistic* I don’t agree.” He stared at Aileen. “Aileen. Is your VR system ‘External’ or ‘Implant’?”

Confused, she answered his abrupt question, “Huh…? It’s the typical ‘External’ one.”

Currently, VR machines fall under two general categories: ‘External’ or ‘Implant’.

Just as the name implies, ‘External’ VR systems perform their functions on the brain and nervous system from outside of the body. This system specializes in customization. By changing out certain parts, one could freely adjust the functionality and ability of their machine.

On the other hand, ‘Implant’ VR systems are embedded directly into the user’s body and connect to the cerebral nerves. It’s an electronic machine that mimics the nervous system. Their flaw is that the hardware on the hybrid computers embedded directly into the body, is difficult to change out.

The ‘Implants’ main feature is their accurate information relay. However, customizing the machine is rather difficult to do. Also while using other devices in conjunction with ‘Externals’ causes some interference, ‘Implants’ can’t be used with other devices at all.

Currently, ‘Externals’ are the most common system due to its better performance. Many people are having their ‘Implants’ removed and are changing to ‘Externals’.

—Aside from a small fraction of people.

“I have an ‘Implant’,” Kei continued, “Specifically, it’s the ‘IMBI-Type P’.”

“’IMBI’, and a ‘Type P’ at that?! Isn’t that the first model of VR systems?”

“Yes, it’s old. But sadly, I’m still using it.”

“…So that means…”

“Well, I do think something is wrong, but…” Kei breathed shallowly. “I’m bedridden with a disease called fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva—a rare disease that changes muscle into bone. I first showed symptoms about 15 years ago. About five years ago, I stopped being able to move.”

“…”

Aileen was overwhelmed and kept silent, but Kei’s story didn’t stop there, “Right now, I’m a lump of growing bones and a nervous system. I took part in clinical trials 12 years ago, and the results were outstanding. I helped implement VR systems for a practical use—but, the components of it were larger than anticipated. It fused with my nerves so now I can’t change it out. Since then they’ve kept a close eye on both the hardware and the software, somehow they’ve manage to update it. Although the last update was three years ago.”

“Speaking of three years…”

“That’s right, that was the year 『Demondal』first launched.” A fleeting smile flashed across his face.

“I jumped at their slogan, ‘A reality like never before’. The most important part for someone like me who spent all their time in virtual reality, was human interaction. It was worth it, so I underwent surgery for the machine’s installation. My family, the doctor, the supervising college professor, they all were against it. It wasn’t clear if my already weak body would be able to handle it or not. But I selfishly told them, ‘At any cost, I want reality. Living any more idly than this would just be more painful.’ They all gave in in the end.”

Kei continued telling his story with dream-like eyes. “Honestly, 『Demondal』’s reality was amazing. The wind over the grassy plains, the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, even the warmth of the sun felt real. Plants and animals, NPC behavior, the feeling of my own body, everything that I could see, and everything that I could touch, seemed real. 『Demondal』’s ‘reality’ was on an entirely different level than any other game. Almost everything that I needed, 『Demondal』had available—but, there was a limit.” Kei met Aileen’s eyes and quietly smiled. “My machine is optimized for 『Demondal』. Even though I’ve worn it out, it still has some life to it; it still can run the game. But, it’s at its limit, Aileen. No matter what kind of major update, no matter the technological innovation–” Kei

scooped up some of the sand at his feet and watched it fall through the cracks between his fingers. He resolutely stated, “–My machine wouldn’t be able to handle the information processing.”

“…”

Aileen said nothing.

“…Well, that turned into a dark story, but enough about me. What I wanted to say was that we’ll soon find out if this world is inside the game, or if it is a parallel world. Of course, even my machine could easily handle a major update for a time. I would just be waiting for the system to falter and terminate the program. So, what I suggest is—Hey, wait, are you crying?”

“I… no, I’m definitely not…”

“No, you’re obviously crying, aren’t you?”

Kei walked over to Aileen, who was covering her face with her hands, and patted her back while wearing a wry smile.

“There’s no reason for you to cry. Long ago, I may have cried too. But, because of this virtual reality technology, I’m not really unhappy, you know.”

“Y-you’re wrong. It’s not… like I’m pitying… you…”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Kei hugged Aileen from behind and gently stroked her head like one does when calming a baby.

Why am I consoling her? He thought it funny and couldn’t hold back a snicker.

“…I’m sorry. I’m good now.”

Just a couple minutes later Aileen calmed down. She gently stroked Kei’s hands, which were still on her shoulders.

With two more pats on her shoulder, Kei returned to sitting in front of her.

"…"

He made eye contact with Aileen over the fire and she looked away seemingly embarrassed, "…It's not what you think. I wasn't crying because I felt bad for you."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, well… that's how it is. So please don't worry about it."

Kei returned her denial with a small smile.
"Enough, let's continue from before."

"Alright. So, what was it that you were going to suggest?"

"It's nothing special. What I was going to suggest was that we should treat this as a parallel world that is similar to 『Demondal』. If this is inside of the game and the system malfunctioned, then there would be a fix within a few days. Aileen, it's a little personal, but do you live by yourself?"

"No. I live with my family."

"No need to worry then. Once it's time to eat your family should pull off your machine if you don't go. Unlike anime, the machine won't fry your brain if someone tries to interfere with it."

"Hey, you lied saying that you don't know much about anime, didn't you?"

"Who knows?"

They giggled together.

“Well, with that said, as long as this is inside the game there is no reason to panic. Although, if this *does* happen to be a parallel world…”

“We should panic *a little*.”

“That’s right. We should act as though it’s the worst case of the two theories,” Kei concluded and gave a small sigh. He was parched. Telling his long story made him thirsty.

“…Aileen, do you have any water?”

“Water? I think I have a canteen in Sasuke’s saddle pouch.”
“‘Well prepared means no worries’, huh.”[3]

“Nothing, just talking to myself. I’m going to take a drink, I’m thirsty.”

Kei got up and approached Sasuke, who tilted his head as if saying, “You called me?” He went through the contents of the saddle pouch.

Aileen called out to Kei, who was still searching for the water, “So, what are we going to do now?”

“Hmm. What should we do?”

“We can’t just stay here forever, right?”

“We’re thirsty. Our butts are sore. We should search for some sort of civilization, shouldn’t we?”

“That’s what it comes down to after all.”

Sure enough, the canteen was at the very bottom of the pouch. Kei pushed aside the potions and grabbed hold of it. *Thank goodness*, he thought to himself. Without even shaking the canteen to check, it felt decently full. It was difficult to find words expressing his fortune that Aileen carried a canteen around, since he would rather not quench his thirst with a bad tasting potion.

He removed the cap and slowly poured the water into his mouth. Kei thought, *It'd be really hard to believe this is a game…* He felt the water flow down his throat. He didn't believe that the realness of this feeling could possibly be replicated through VR technology.

Earlier, Kei said that they should move on the assumption that they were in a parallel world. However, Kei was already half-certain that it was a parallel world—he even wished it was so.

I wonder why this is happening though, he thought, as he held some water in his mouth. *If I'm not mistaken, before we got here we picked up the『Dragon Stinger』 from the coastal town of Kitene, then we fought off the brigands that attacked us. I wonder… what happened after that?* He couldn't recall.

"Aileen."

"Hm?"

"What were we doing just before we got here? On our way back from Kitene, those brigands attacked us, and then we turned the tables on them. That's as far as I can remember…"

"Now that you mention it… Why did we forget?" Aileen put her hand on her chin in thought. "…Beat the brigands… Only went a little… at 'Urvan Valley'…"

Just then, they both remembered and simultaneously said, "The fog!"

Just why did they forget?

That's right, a mysterious fog at the valley. Then they entered the fog together. After that—

"…"

After that—

“…Shit, I can’t remember,” cursed Kei.

Something. Something was there. He couldn’t say exactly what, but *something* was there—

“Bururu.”

Kei snapped his head up at a snort from Mikazuki.

Up until this point Mikazuki had been in his own world, eating grass. He stood up and looked around. His ears twitched and his eyes narrowed in anxiety.

“…Mikazuki?”

Kei knew what was coming. This expression, these movements. They were the same as Mikazuki’s AI when it had been a game.

—It was when an enemy was nearing them.

Kei heard something whistle quietly through the air. Chills ran down his spine.

Bloodlust.

“Wha-!!”

His body moved before his mind. As if trying to avoid the chilling sensation he doubled over backwards. Not even an arm’s length away, something flew by. An arrow smacked the face of the rock and rebounded.

—*Someone shot at me.*

—*Why did they attack?*

—How many? From where?

Such thoughts flooded his mind, but the sound of something flying through the air interrupted him. He felt the chills run down his spine again. However, in that moment he realized that he wasn't the one being targeted.

He looked toward where the bloodlust was aimed. Straight ahead was a blonde girl.

"Aileen, du—"

Thud. The heavy sound of hitting muscle. An arrow *sprouted* from the right side of Aileen's chest.

"…Eh?" She murmured, her eyes wide in disbelief. She looked toward Kei, 'What?' written on her face. "Ah…" She slumped over.

"Aileen!!!"

—Like a marionette that had its strings cut, she fell.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

[1] Q.E.D.: Stands for the Latin phrase 'quod erat demonstrandum', meaning 'which is what had to be proven'.

[2] (?): The word 本人 (honnin) was used here to refer to Mikazuki. Honnin is used with people, but Mikazuki is, well… a horse.

[3] "'Well prepared means no worries', huh.": Kei is saying an idiom in Japanese that translates to the dialogue. But Aileen doesn't understand the idiom.

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6. Escape

Kei was quick to move. He cursed, “God damn it!” while kicking the camp fire wood. The fire scattered and went out, covering the area in darkness.

“Aileen!”

He quickly grabbed Aileen and nimbly carried her, practically tumbling behind the rock. It was the so-called ‘Princess Carry’. However, this heroine lost her romantic appeal due to the arrow stuck in her chest. The petite girl, snugly held in his arms, was surprisingly light.

“Get it together,” Kei told her quietly.

But she couldn’t answer. Her face was distorted with pain and she breathed in short, shallow breaths.

—*We were careless,* he thought in disgust as he clenched his teeth.

It was a new moon, only the faint light of the stars shone upon the grassy plains. The light from their fire would certainly stick out, even from a long distance.

Even in the game we needed to remain vigilant…!

NPC thieves, monsters that are unafraid of fire, even PKers. Carelessly standing out at night, especially with only a small party, was dangerous even in the game. The same goes *especially* if it were a parallel world.

If we had at least not kept our backs exposed, Kei cursed his carelessness.

Aileen's 『Enhanced Vision』 wasn't as good as Kei's crest-engraved eyes in the dark. Therefore, her 'Passive Sense' couldn't optimally activate.

He had the highest level of vision, being a long distance archer. Combined with his sensitivity to bloodlust, he should have been the one to keep watch.

Kei was also panicked about the day's events. They completely forgot the idea of keeping watch.

"Ugh… Ke…i…" Aileen groaned, her forehead damp with sweat.

Everything swirling around in his head suddenly stopped. He changed gears and thought, *Well, what do I do now? There isn't much time.*

Kei popped his head out from behind the rock and looked over the area. Without the light of the fire, it was nearly pitch black. However, with his vision, his eyes quickly adapted to the darkness.

Three, five, no—six people that I can see.

Camouflaged with grass, the shadows of people wriggled. Taking the rock's blind spots into account, Kei estimated two or three more waited in ambush. They were completely surrounded.

Whoever the assailant was didn't matter in this situation. What was important was the intellect to maintain archers and surround them.

"…… О й……П о ч е …… у ," Aileen quietly muttered something seemingly incoherent while slightly trembling. Kei had trouble hearing it, and didn't understand the meaning. Her gaze was distant and unfocused. It was hard to see her pupils, but her face was pale.

"Don't speak, just stay still," Kei whispered into her ear while trying to think of what to do next. It didn't take long to decide. "Mikazuki, Sasuke, come."

Mikazuki answered with a, “Bururu.”

Quick, but careful not to touch Aileen’s wound, Kei straddled Mikazuki. “Aileen, this will hurt a little, but please bear with it.”

Perhaps she caught his words. She muttered something quietly and faintly nodded.

“Here we go!” Kei spurred on Mikazuki.

Sure enough the dark brown horse cantered forward without as much as a whinny.

“They’re on a horse!”

“They’re getting away!”

The hidden assailants stood up after seeing Kei and Aileen burst out from behind the rock.

Their bow strings made a twang and sent arrows whistling through the air. Kei’s face stiffened, but it seemed like they weren’t going to be hit. The bloodlust felt as if it were aimed in an entirely different direction. He let his tense shoulders relax a little.

Turning around, he saw the leather-clad men flail their weapons in an uproar. Another arrow was shot at them, but the archer probably couldn’t see them well since it missed by a few meters. Out of the remaining men, Kei couldn’t spot a single one riding a horse.

–They managed to easily escape.

Kei checked to make sure.

Naturally, Aileen’s treatment should have come before running away.

From what he could see, the arrow in her chest barely missed a group of arteries. Depending on the tip, it may still have damaged some veins though.

At the very least, she has a ruptured lung. She’ll have trouble breathing if this keeps up. Also, holding her while being jolted on top of a horse certainly couldn’t be good for her.

Although, being surrounded by the enemy made treating her rather difficult.

Of course, if they used a potion, then the wound may have healed completely then and there. But when he thought about the pain she went through with healing the cut on her palm… It would most likely not show immediate effects on a wound this serious, either. In the worst case, she could pass out from the pain.

During recovery Aileen would be completely defenseless. Even after, if she fainted, then he would have to fight while protecting her. Taking all that in to consideration, he was only left with the safest option—escape.

Before setting up camp, Kei climbed up the rocky mountain to survey the geography. If they continued west as they were, they would run into the woods.

It wasn't exactly safe; he didn't know what kinds of monsters could be lurking there, but at the least, it would be difficult for anybody to pursue them.

He would heal Aileen in the woods, and then they could continue to flee. Or, depending on her condition, he could have her ride Sasuke while he turned back and attacked them alone—

"Awoo, awoo."

A beast's cries from behind interrupted Kei's train of thought.

He turned around. Low to the ground three large black shadows ran toward them.

"—'Hound Wolves'!"

They had black, unkempt fur and sharp, pointed ears. Even with only the starlight, their eyes glowed eerily. The leather collars they wore around their necks showed that they weren't wild, but were owned by a person.

Hound Wolf, otherwise known as, 'Black Siccer'.

In the game, they were an offensive type of pet and were extremely popular. The hardest part of taming one is stripping it of its brutal nature. Once tamed, they will carry out any order in any situation with complete loyalty.

They were far more nimble than their large stature would suggest, and were quick witted with unparalleled stamina, and high attack power. And above all else, they had a frightening tracking ability.

The wolves use their sense of smell to obstinately chase down their prey wherever they go. Even after galloping throughout the night on horseback, it was possible for the wolves to catch up in approximately thirty minutes.

Even if they were to run to the ends of the earth, their 'scent' would still linger for the wolves to follow.

There were only two ways that the Hound Wolves would stop their pursuit. If the owner called them off with a whistle, or when they take down and kill their prey.

They could even be called the Forerunners of Death—and three of them were chasing Kei and Aileen.

"…This isn't good."

The wolves ran like they were a pack, driving on together. Surprise flooded Kei's face. Until just a moment ago, they had an easy-going flight. But now, it was changed completely into a difficult situation. Even Sasuke, running behind Mikazuki, showed signs of panic.

For a horseback archer like Kei, Hound Wolves weren't such a frightening foe. In a confrontation with Kei's infallible marksmanship and his top-of-the-line horse, Mikazuki, an enemy who only had speed, wasn't good enough. Their larger bodies made them easier to take down than a rabbit in the grassy plains. At least, that's how it would be in a normal situation.

But now, he was holding Aileen and couldn't use his bow.

He couldn't use his bow.

…We're in trouble, thought Kei as sweat dampened his brow.

To Kei, who mainly used a bow from horseback, having that taken away from him was an unforeseen situation.

For argument's sake, if it had been a game then Kei would have immediately dropped and left Aileen.

She could possibly die from the impact of hitting the ground, or could be devoured by the Hound Wolves. However, in that short moment Kei would've been able to use his bow to kill off the wolves.

Afterward, everything would be fine because he would collect the loot, including Aileen's, and have her respawn at her base. That way they could avoid losing any items and minimize the death penalty.

In short, inside the game, if victory was assured then there would be no merit to keeping his offensive abilities inhibited.

However, when it comes to reality—

I suppose I can't just drop her and go.

In Kei's arms, Aileen grimaced as if trying to deal with the jolting from the horse.

Abandoning such a fragile girl would be no more than an act of savagery. Even if he was ordered to, he wouldn't be able to do it.

If this were『Demondal』then even reviving would be possible, but…

As long as the possibility exists that this is just a world that looks like the game, he couldn't be too rash.

It was too dangerous to be thrown onto the stage with no practice.

"Awoo, ohn!" a wolf howled. The hound wolves slowly caught up as he was thinking.

The black-furred pursuers ran full speed and easily passed Mikazuki with their lightning speed.

It's unfortunate, but even the horse with the highest level in stamina and speed in the game, prided in its excellent long distance performance, Mikazuki, was weak to this type of foe. Mikazuki was not the powerful kind, but rather the fast kind. Having even just one more person like Aileen on the horse dropped the maximum travel distance sharply.

"Hey, Mikazuki, step on it! I know you're faster than this!!"

Mikazuki glanced at Kei as if saying don't ask for the impossible. Even so, he ran hard.

While his muscles weren't too dense and he didn't appear to be, he was actually pretty heavy. Overloading Mikazuki with another rider is what caused this sticky situation.

…Looks like we won't be able to just run away.

He knew it, but he thought it over again as he stared into the distance. Aileen's throwing knife pouch came into his view momentarily. Sadly, Kei was no good with throwing knives. Honestly, he had never tried it seriously.

Thoughts like, if I had known it would come to this then I would've practiced seriously, crowded his mind. But it was too late for regrets.

Life is about playing the hand you're dealt, huh.

He reached into the pouch slung at his waist and pulled out a pebble-like lead ball about the size of a quail egg. It was a pebble.

It was something he carried with him as a personal protection charm. Its effects on the thick-furred wolves would be limited, but still better than nothing.

"If it could at least trip them up…"

Kei decided to aim for the Hound Wolf to his right.

Mikazuki sensed what Kei was doing from the movement in the stirrups and turned his head sideways and turned on a dime.

The rapidly approaching wolves ran low to the ground in preparation to pounce. Just as they put power into their hind legs to attack Mikazuki, Kei threw something down from his right hand.

Kei moved nimbly as he threw various pebbles from point blank range with his above average strength.

The wolves weren't even given the time to react, the power hidden in the pebbles blew up in their faces.

"Gyan!" The Hound Wolf yelped and tripped from the strong attack.

It lay on the ground, writhing and covering its nose as it shrank away into the distance.

After defeating the lead runner, Kei relaxed a little. But, "Bururu," Mikazuki warned him.

On the left was a wolf already at point-blank range preparing itself to pounce.

—Crap!

He determined that taking out another pebble would take too long, so he reached for the short sword on his hip.

The Hound Wolf kicked off the ground the same moment that Kei drew his sword.

However keen and nimble a wolf it was, once airborne it couldn't change its body position. Kei stabbed directly at the scruff of its neck.

He felt his short sword cut through the flesh and all the way to the bone. A wet cough escaped from the wolf's throat. However, the Hound Wolf didn't falter; it opened its mouth wide and twisted its head to go for Kei's right arm.

Its tenacity and willpower surprised Kei to the point of dropping his sword.

The Hound Wolf with its throat cut failed to bite its target, and died just like that in the grass.

"Only one more to go…!"

He looked at the last, oncoming Hound Wolf, and rummaged around his pouch.

Two pebbles left.

He held one in his right hand. He carefully aimed at the wolf.

"Grrr…" It growled as if on guard. The wolf lowered its body closer to the ground, and bit by bit it changed its course, trying to toy with Kei. It knew he held something dangerous.

Kei thought to himself that the beast in front of him was truly intelligent, but while he admired it, he was also a bit annoyed.

“Just like the game, as long as I calmly let it come at me it should be okay…!” He spat out and glared at the black beast.

—Die!

Kei filled his body with strength and used the strongest killing intent he could. His bloodlust gave off such a dense pressure that it could even be felt physically. It made all the fur on the Hound Wolf stand on end.

It unknowingly began to tremble, and for just a moment, it froze up.

At just that moment, Kei’s right arm became a blur.

The lead pebble whistled through the air. He threw it with all his strength; a guaranteed kill shot.

Luckily for the wolf (not so much for Kei), he messed up his aim.

The pebble was slightly off of its brow, where Kei aimed. Instead, it barely clipped the hound’s ear before hitting it in the back.

The pebble went through the pelt and hit hide. It sounded painful. But, to the Hound Wolf this amount of pain was nothing more than being rubbed the wrong way.

Shrugging off Kei’s earlier frightening presence, the wolf bared its fangs and barked viciously while charging towards Kei.

“So ’Offensive Sense’ doesn’t work well…”

He sighed, *if only I were more used to thrown weapons…*

The wolf's eyes became bloodshot after the pebble missed. It rushed right in front of Kei, but even then Kei was calm.

It was all coming to an end anyhow.

The wolf focused all of its attention on Kei, forgetting the *other* one only until the dark brown hair came into its peripheral vision.

"Bururu—!"

From behind the wolf Sasuke came fiercely charging in.

Involuntarily, the Hound Wolf was taken aback in surprise. Sasuke used his right fore-hoof and mercilessly kicked its defenseless flank.

It sounded like the ground being torn. The black wolf's stomach was ripped to shreds.

The wolf spat up blood and stumbled to a halt, where Sasuke kicked with both rear legs. Bits and pieces of entrails scattered and flew.

"Well done!!"

Hearing Kei's joyous voice, Sasuke wore a proud expression as if saying, *haha, aren't I strong?* Sharp, hardened bone was hidden; folded under the heel portion of his hooves.

He was a Bowser Horse.

They have the highest performance abilities of all horse type mounts, but strictly speaking, they aren't horses.

Camouflaged as high level horses they are ferocious omnivorous monsters.

Taming one is considered to be even more difficult than a Hound Wolf. Even once successfully tamed, they require proper care.

"…You did well too, Mikazuki. Thank you."

Kei patted his neck as thanks. A reply was unnecessary, but Mikazuki seemed like he wanted to. He glanced up at Kei and whinnied.

If the horses weren't shown gratitude, it would ruin their moods and they'd become as stubborn as a donkey. That was how the AI was in the game, so it should be similar in this world.

I need to buy some carrots once we get to town… No, I worked Mikazuki hard, I should get some meat…

Kei thought to himself as a grove of trees came into view in front of them.

Well, tending to Aileen comes first, I suppose…

Thinking about it made him depressed.

He anxiously rode Mikazuki into the dark grove.

† † †

Inside the grove, it was nearly pitch black. The overgrown leaves overhead blocked out the starlight.

Mikazuki had the vision enhancing crest just like Kei, but Sasuke did not, so he had a hard time walking. Kei had to lead him by the reins.

"…Now then, I guess this is good."

He stopped Mikazuki about 100 meters in. There were absolutely no living creatures in sight. Mikazuki was calm, so that meant there were no enemies, even above them.

“Hey, Aileen. Can you hear me?” Kei asked as he wiped the sweat off her brow.

“где…кто…?” Aileen muttered quietly, as if she were plagued by a nightmare. Kei couldn’t understand what she was saying, as it was entirely in Russian.

Holding Aileen, he slowly dismounted. He took off his cloak and laid it over the dead and decaying leaves, then laid down Aileen.

“Okay. Mikazuki, Sasuke, you’re on guard duty.”

Mikazuki replied with a snort, and Sasuke began wandering and looking around with a smart expression. Even though he most likely only saw darkness.

“Let’s start.”

Kei lightly washed his hands with water from the canteen and inspected Aileen’s wound.

Her black clothes got in the way, so he went to pull out his short sword to cut it, but nothing was in the scabbard. Then he remembered, he’d just parted with it during the fight with the Hound Wolves.

“Aileen, I’m going to be borrowing your knife.”

He pulled out a throwing knife and cut the cloth at her chest.

“…Hm.”

As one would expect, he didn’t feel any ulterior motives even while looking at a cute girl’s chest while there was an arrow sprouting from it.

“…Just two centimeters higher and this would’ve hit her right subclavian artery[1].

The arrow was stuck snugly between her rib bones. Judging from the wound, the arrow wasn’t a broadhead nor barbed. Kei determined that it was a simple blunt tip, or at least similar in shape. Therefore, pulling out the arrow most likely wouldn’t make the wound bigger.

Kei wanted to tend the wound immediately, but before pulling it out he thought that Aileen should heal a little first. “Aileen. Can you hear me? Can you drink a potion?”

He repeated it in her ear, but that didn’t elicit a good response either. Aileen had been quietly murmuring to herself ever since earlier, but through her hoarse voice it sounded like it was Russian.

With no other choice left, he would have to slowly dribble it into her mouth, but she spoke, “…не вкусно…” Most of the liquid spilled over her lips as her expression turned into a grimace. He still had no clue what she was saying, but it was probably ‘Yuck’. At any rate, as long as she was out of it, they wouldn’t be able to communicate properly.

…But if I think about it, isn’t this actually a good chance?

With the potion in hand, he reconsidered.

Extreme pain could possibly accompany the healing from potions.

Just by healing a cut on her palm, Aileen was coated in cold sweat. And now, pulling an arrow out of her chest and closing up the wound—he didn’t even want to think about how painful it would be.

He thought about it briefly before deciding. “…I guess it would be best to hurry and get it done while she’s still out of it…?” He nodded once to himself and then removed his gauntlet and rolled up his sleeve.
Just in case, he placed several ready to use potions at his knees. Kei exhaled and gripped the arrow.

“…”

He had pulled out countless arrows in the game, but the pressure was different in reality. Holding the wound with his left hand, he felt her heart beating.

Kei took a deep breath, “Let’s do this.”

Preparing himself for the worst, he took care not to open the wound further and then, to minimize the pain, he boldly pulled the arrow out in one swift motion.

“Nngh…!?” Aileen grimaced in pain and twisted her body while groaning. Black-ish blood came spilling from the wound. It was venous[2] blood. No arteries were hit.

“Now then, don’t blame me for this, Aileen…”

Muttering that it was for her sake, Kei tipped one of the potions over the wound.

The viscous light blue liquid trickled down and touched the wound.

“Unngh!!!!”

It sounded like the sizzling of meat on a grill. Aileen snapped her eyes open, “Gii—!!!”

As she shrieked he pinned her down while she began to violently struggle and continued to trickle the potion on her wound. Not using enough of the potion and leaving the wound only half healed would be the worst outcome in this case.

“Aaahhhh—!!!!”

It may have been due to the pain, but Aileen tried to push away Kei’s arms with a surprising amount of strength for such a small body. Her shrieks then sounded like the howl of a beast, completely unlike a young girl.

“Sorry, Aileen, calm down! Forgive me!”

The light blue liquid suspiciously inched its way to the wound as if it was a worm and had its own will. It sounded eerily like a pot of boiling water.

Before long, her violent struggle became small spasms and her eyes rolled back into her head, exposing only the whites of her eyes.

Occasionally, she coughed violently, spitting up a reddish brown mass each time. Then almost at the end, some strange steam or vapor came out of her nose and mouth and began to rise. Perhaps the potion had fully volatized.

“…ah…ngh…”

At the very end, when she settled down, foam started to come out of her mouth. Like the potion, the foam was a faint light blue.

“…”

Kei forgot to breathe and drew away from the pitiful scene for a little, but then, concerned, he took Aileen’s pulse.

“…Thank god. She’s alive.”

She continued to foam as she twitched, so it should have been obvious that she was still alive. However, after checking her pulse himself he sighed in relief.

Next, he checked the wound. Just like with her palm, there was a white scar left behind, but the wound itself was completely closed.

He put his ear on her chest and checked her breathing as well. It was a bit fast, but he only heard well-regulated heart beats and nothing to indicate any abnormalities with her respiratory system.

“Safe for now, huh…”

No matter how much time passed, her eyes still remained white which creeped him out, so he closed her eyelids.

“…I’ll have to be careful to not get seriously hurt.” Kei muttered, “Otherwise I’d end up just like this.”

“Bururu.” Mikazuki clearly agreed with a quiet snort.

“…Hm?” Kei raised his head and looked into the distance.

It had been nearly pitch black in the grove earlier, but now he could see a light at the edge.

The orange light swayed slowly.

While he was watching he saw one, two, and more and more lights.

“Will-O-Wisps…?”

Kei was suspicious of the low ranking spirits of the deceased, but soon realized that wasn’t what they were.

They were man-made fires. It was torch light. Their movements were small, but he was certain that they were approaching. Although they had torches out, it was too dark and they were too far for him to make out who they were.

“…It doesn’t look like those guys from before…”

They were coming from the opposite side. Besides that, it was too soon for them to have gotten here on foot.

“…”

What to do.

Kei hesitated for a short while before reaching a conclusion.

“Let’s go check it out. I’m counting on you, Mikazuki.”

Carrying Aileen, he once again mounted Mikazuki.

Kei put on his headpiece, fastened a cloth around his mouth to hide his face, and checked his backup weapon. He’d lost his short sword and used two pebbles, but everything else was in order. No problem.

He gave a small nod and grabbed Sasuke’s reins, then lightly kicked Mikazuki’s flank.

The distance between them was quickly covered by trotting, as they weren’t all that far away. The lights became clearer and clearer as they narrowed the gap.

“…A village?”

In the grove, a cleared out section of land turned out to be a small village. Kei could see a number of villagers holding torches coming and going hurriedly in front of a large log house.

“…Hey, something is coming!”

“Everybody, gather up!”

“The light! Bring the light!”

They probably heard Mikazuki and Sasuke’s hooves, throwing them into this panic.

…English, huh. At least we’ll be able to understand each other.

As he thought to himself, the small village was suddenly illuminated by several fiercely burning cressets[3] placed around it.

About ten villagers readied their clubs or bows and arrows, facing in Kei's direction.

He lightly pulled Mikazuki's reins slowing him down to a walk, and they slowly approached the village.

Among the villagers, one spear wielding man with a tough face stepped forward and challenged Kei, "Halt! Who goes there?"

It had only been several hours since Kei and Aileen had been transported to the world of 『Demondal』.

—The first villager confronted them.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

A Note From the Author

Chapter 6. Escape (Afterword)

By the way, Kei and Aileen are generally speaking in English.

[1] right subclavian artery: Check out the first picture :p

http://www.emedicalhelp.com/2015/05/subclavian-steal-syndrome-symptoms.html

[2] venous: Arterial blood is a bright red color, and venous blood is a dark macaroon color, so that's how he concludes that no arteries were hit.

[3] cressets: A metal container of oil, grease, wood, or coal burned as a torch and typically mounted on a pole.

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7. Tahfu

The firewood in the cresset crackled.

"—Who goes there?!" About ten steps away, a man with a tough face and a spear challenged Kei.

The villager's face was flushed with nervousness. Full of suspicion, his gaze pierced through Kei.

The other men around him also had the same look. They were hunched over and held any weapons they had on hand; clubs, hoes, and lumber axes readied, prepared to move at any time.

It was their entire combat force. Not a single one of them even tried to hide their wariness toward Kei.

…What a warm welcome this is.

Their focus on Kei sent a tingle down his spine. Not quite bloodlust, but it was obvious that he was an uninvited guest.

Kei briefly thought to himself, how should I go about answering? He couldn't stay quiet forever. "I'm not anyone suspicious," letting them know he wasn't an enemy came first.

"'Not anyone suspicious'…?"

The villagers confronting Kei murmured with each other quietly.

A new moon in the dead of night. Hardly the time for someone to go for a stroll.
He came out from the darkness on horseback without a torch.
His entire body is covered in leather armor. A sword at his hip, and a heavy bow in hand.
Lastly, he's holding a young girl in his left arm.
Her brow was slick with sweat, she was pale like a sickly person.
She wore foreign black clothes that they had never seen before.
But for some reason, it seemed she was roughed up by someone.
The front of her clothes were cut open, exposing her white chest.

"…"

—He's suspicious. He's way too suspicious.

That was the consensus of the men. In fact, there wasn't a single non-suspicious point about him.

"…So, who are you?" the man in the middle asked again, but with a lower tone, readying his spear once more.

They're being even more cautious of me…? Kei pondered to himself, but then replied, "Right. To put it frankly, we were just attacked by robbers and wound up here after escaping."

He then summed up exactly what their situation was.

They were surrounded by fog and before they knew it they were somewhere unfamiliar. The sun had set so they set up camp, but then were attacked by what seemed to be a group of thieves before escaping into the grove of trees.

After that, he noticed torchlight in the pitch black and went toward it. That was the situation.

He didn't tell a single lie. Although, he did keep the fact that they were players from a game called 『Demondal』 hidden. He spoke as if they were normal travelers through and through.
After listening to Kei's story the tough faced villager slightly lowered his spear and asked with a bewildered yet cautious expression, "…So, in the end, what is it that you want?"

"Honestly, we didn't come here with any particular desire. We just came to check out what the light was… Why exactly were you all up and moving about at this hour?" questioned Kei.

"…I'll answer your question," said a deep-voiced man casually.

It came from Kei's right. A man holding a bow sluggishly came out from the shadows of a small house, perfectly in Kei's blind spot.

His face was good looking. He looked sullen with the lower half of his face concealed by a reddish brown beard. The man was well-built, with an honest and serious face. Tight brown clothes wrapped around his body and a feather decorated leather cap adorned his head.

"I'm Mandel… A hunter of this village," said the good looking man—Mandel—as he lightly removed his cap.

Kei realized that he had yet to give his name. "I'm Kei. A pleasure." As he said this, perhaps due to being an archer himself, his eyes were naturally drawn to the bow Mandel was holding.

It was a simple short bow. It was made of wood with a glossy finish, while the handle was wrapped with black cloth. Several other villagers also carried bows, but Mandel's gave off the impression of long use. It was most likely used for hunting day after day.

Mandel's hat drew Kei's attention next. Specifically, the feather on it. He stared at the feather on Mandel's hat.

"…"

For a moment, they caught each other's gaze.

Smiles crept up onto both of their faces. A silent understanding. The men around them all wore perplexed expressions.

"…And as for why we were moving about," Mandel returned to being straight-faced as if nothing happened and continued to speak, "just a bit ago, we suddenly heard a terrible howl. Everyone roused themselves out of bed… It may have been a ferocious monster."

"Monster?"

"Yeah. They occasionally come into human territory from the woods or the mountains in this season. We can't let ourselves get attacked while we sleep… We'll probably sleep in shifts tonight." He gestured to the villagers around him. "Kei, you were in the grove, right…? Did you see anything?"

"Hmm… Not really, I didn't see anything like that beast you mentioned."

Even thinking back upon it, he couldn't think of anything. Only the Hound Wolves sent by their assailants came to

mind; they didn't even make it to the grove.

"I suppose that even if there were a monster you wouldn't be able to see it in this darkness," the man with the spear cut into the silence with a hint of irritation.

"Mikazuki—the horses weren't alerted, so at the very least, there wasn't anything in the area. For what it's worth, both this guy and I can see pretty well in the dark," he patted Mikazuki's neck.

The villagers eyed up Kei and then the darkness with suspicious expressions. Mandel just nodded and honestly replied with, "I see."

"—Pardon us while you're in the middle of your conversation."

The sound of footsteps on stone approached from the center of the village.

From the darkness appeared a hunched old man with white hair and a plump middle-aged man.

"Welcome, travelers. I am Bennett, the leader of the village 'Tahfu'."

"I'm his son, Danny."

A small smile rose on the old man with white hair, Bennett's, face. His plump son introduced himself with a haughty attitude.

I see. So the village leader and leader-to-be have shown up.

Kei made sure to not be rude while trying to observe the two.
The village leader, Bennett, seemed like a good-natured old man. At a glance he appeared kind, but below his eyebrows, which were pulled down into a ノ丶 shape, his gaze nonchalantly took in all of Kei. The words 'devious old man' came to mind.

On the other hand, there wasn't much to his son, Danny. He was plump, slovenly, and, whether good or bad, gave off the impression of a born aristocrat. In a way they were alike, but unlike Bennett, he didn't have a timid face and his gaze toward them was rude. He specifically seemed to focus on Aileen, who was being held by Kei.

And they call this village 'Tahfu'…

Kei had never heard of the village in the game. As he thought to himself that this wasn't a game after all, he spoke, "I apologize for being on horseback. My name is Keiichi Nogawa. Keiichi is my first name, and Nogawa is my family name. I'm sorry for the ruckus we've caused." He said confidently as he removed the cloth hiding his face.

The villagers quietly began talking among themselves. Bennett's smiling face seemed stuck that way as it had not changed, but Danny's eyebrows perked up and his complexion became somewhat stiff.

"…Nogawa-dono[1]. What can our village do for you?" Bennett asked politely with his insincere smile.

"Just Kei is fine. We just finished discussing that earlier, but we didn't come here with any particular desire in mind. Although," his eyes fell to the girl in his arms.

She was sweating still and moaned in her sleep, "Uungh…"

Kei resumed, "She isn't in very good shape. If possible, I want to let her rest…" He asked the rest with his eyes, How about it? He continued further, "Of course, we will provide appropriate compensation."

"I see, I see," Bennet slowly responded agreeably. "As you said, your friend doesn't seem too well. However, I am

not certain whether or not our small village will have anything of use to you… I will ask the other villagers. Danny, Cronen, help me."

Bennett bowed as if to say, we will return shortly, and then turned and walked away. Danny and the spear wielder—apparently named Cronen—followed suit.

As Kei watched them from atop his horse, Bennett and Cronen gave off a similar feeling. He shifted his attention to the figure behind them, "…Mandel."

"Hm…? What is it?"

"That guy, Cronen, the spear wielder, is he related to the leader?"

"Yes, he's also his son… The eldest is Danny, next is Cronen."

"I see. Thank you."

Satisfied, Kei thought to himself that there was a little of an age gap between the two brothers, unaware of the grim faces the villagers around him wore.

† † †

After moving far enough into the darkness that Kei wouldn't be able to see, Bennett began, "So, Cronen. If I recall, you have an open bed in your house, no?"

"Father! You couldn't possibly be considering letting them into our village?"

"That *was* my intention." At Cronen's raised voice Bennett tilted his head as if to ask, was I wrong?

"You both heard his story! What would we do if he's one of those thieves?!"

That seemed to be the most of Cronen's worries.

Pretending to be attacked by thieves and dressing up one member as someone that barely escaped alive—slipping into their target village, trying to undermine the authority from the inside, and then taking advantage of the chaos and attacking.

Cronen had often heard from peddlers that a group of thieves used this trick to make easy money.

"Hah… I was wondering what the fuss was about, but I guess that's it. Seriously, did you think that something you came up with hadn't already been considered by me or Father?" Danny shrugged his shoulders and sighed after making that spiteful remark. The atmosphere around them all but said, this is why you're a failure of a brother.

"Your way of thinking is too extreme, Cronen. The possibility of that is low," Bennett wasn't angry nor mocking him; he just said plainly, "I am aware that recently there have been groups like that. However, the way that Kei-something snuck in would have been too suspicious. He picked up the grassland peoples' habit and gave his family name, even. He's not suspicious at all. Also, at best, they're a distraction. If they were thieves and had such quality equipment then they're probably doing fine already."

Danny rubbed his chin as he took over for Bennett, "It's just as Father says. If I were a thief, I would have sent a slightly thinner, normal person in."

"You don't understand because you are a poor judge of character, Cronen. All the equipment that Kei had was top-class, you know."

"…Was it?"

Only after his brother pointed it out, did Cronen look at Kei's belongings and realize that he had entirely read into it too much.

Bennett and Danny, who followed in his footsteps, had experience with various materials as representatives of the village, so they naturally gained the ability to judge quality. Their initial judgement came from their role of carefully observing the other party during their first meeting.

Bennett narrowed his eyes and thought about the equipment Kei wore. "That leather armor is amazingly well made. On top of that, those wonderful ornaments I've never seen before—even the ones just on his chest piece would be at least ten silver."

"Ten silver?!" rang Cronen's hysteric voice at Bennett's estimation. Ten silver was proportionate to a peasant's food expenses for a year. "I thought that even expensive leather armor, at most, cost one silver though?"

"Idiot, that's just tanned leathers that are sewn together; it's a cheap, poor quality item. Those low quality items can't be compared with the hardening, defensive capabilities, and the effort put into that guy's armor. For now, assume he's of a different social status. Moreover, there's that small ornament. When I went out shopping before, I looked at various armor, clothing, and accessories, but I didn't see anything as fashionable as that ornament. Even if it were just a work of art it still holds value."

"A very skilled artisan must have tailored it. Even if someone saved up, it doesn't look like something that one can buy on a whim… Besides that, Danny, have you noticed his horse?"

"Yes, it was a very nice horse, wasn't it!" Danny clapped his hands together and praised their horses, "Their fine colored hair, their clever features, even their physique isn't comparable to an ordinary horse! I've never seen a fine horse, but it would probably be like that. There are even two of them!"

Now that you mention it, Cronen thought. The horse that Kei rode in on certainly seemed like it was top class.

The village only owned one horse, and that was for pulling carts. But comparing it to their horses, filled to the brim with strength, would just be absurd.

"Yes, the horses themselves are quite something, but… it's their foreheads. They both have talismans embedded."

"Talismans?" Danny and Cronen simultaneously questioned.

"I myself have only laid eyes upon the real things once. It's a charm against evil spirits. Not some lucky charm, but one imbued with magic. They are said to weaken the power of devils and magic, protecting the possessor. Even I can feel the magical power; they're probably very powerful ones."

Bennett chuckled audibly and smiled.

Except for cases of very talented people, or people who train vigorously, generally, humans' magic power increased with age. After the age of fifty it would start to increase dramatically.

Along with that, the ability to perceive magic would also increase. The more one ages, the more they perceive. People said that even 'spirits' could be sensed with sharp enough senses. It is said that in one's dying hour, their perception becomes strong enough to see the spirits of the deceased.

Furthermore, even in 'Tahfu', the oldest man, Bennett, only slightly felt the power of the talisman.

"A talisman, huh." Cronen held his chin and exhaled deeply in thought.

—He understood that it was something amazing, but he just couldn't actually feel it himself.

That was how Cronen actually felt about it.

In his 20 years of life he had never seen an object imbued with magic. Of course, he knew that such items were valuable; he heard from peddlers that creating magic items took a lot of money. However, since he didn't have any personal experience with it, he couldn't truly understand how amazing it was.

"…That man, just what is he really?"

It seemed that his brother, Danny, had come to grips with the severity of the situation. "Father, it's possible that man is a nobleman."

"You may be right…" Bennett stroked his beard with an easygoing attitude.

"The armor is one thing, but the talisman isn't something you can get just by saving up enough money."

"To think that, even the horses have such a thing…"

"After all, without appropriate social status it would be impossible."

"I can't imagine that the horses would have them but the owners don't."

"I see. Assuming the girl he brought has one too, then there are a total of four talismans… With just what that man has the entire village could live comfortably for an entire year."

"Yeah! Speaking of which, that girl isn't just an ordinary person either!" Danny's nostrils flared and he lost all composure. The fine smoothness and lack of blemishes on her pure, white skin! Her beautiful, long, lustrous blonde hair! It's impossible for her to be a commoner, she is definitely of noble blood!"

Cronen sighed openly at the plump man's sudden excitement and Bennett's lack of response. *He even married the most beautiful girl in the village… His fondness for women is a problem.*

Cronen, considerably younger than his brother, looked coldly at him. It was an open secret that when Danny went shopping in town, he would return smelling of brothel perfumes. It wasn't like the village's money was being embezzled, he spent the money from goods that sold higher than expected, so no one ever complained.

"Hey, Father, do the grassland people have nobles as well?" Exhausted, Cronen leaned on his spear for support while questioning Bennett.

"They do not. It is because, fundamentally, they have clans. There are only some clan heads or elders that manage the clan."

"So then, that guy, Kei…"

"He did not have a clan tattoo on his face, and his introduction was unusual. Most likely, he is not one of the grassland people… I don't understand why he would purposely look like one. Just where did he come from?"

"It seems like he himself is unsure. In the middle of his travels he was caught in a fog, before he knew it, he was near the rocky mountain, is what he said. They may have been caught up in some mysterious phenomenon, he said."

Bennett looked suspiciously at Cronen. And then, realizing that his son took the words of a suspicious traveler at face value, made a half astonished, half resigned face.

"…Well, whatever. It's their business, they probably have things they don't want to talk about. Now then, about what is to come. Hey, Danny! Listen, would you?!"

To Danny, who had been grinningly broadly to himself, everything had been going in one ear and out the other. Now he snapped back to reality.

"Ah, sorry, Father. I was spacing out."

"…Haah. Going back to the first question, Cronen. You have a spare bed in your house, right?"

"Yes. I keep it ready to be used at any time just in case." He gave a small nod.

It was a small room, similar to a storeroom, but his wife liked to keep things clean so it was cleaned regularly.

"Alright. Then I'll be leaving the girl that man brought in your house."

"What was that?! Father, there's a spare bedroom in my house too, you know! I could even wake Cynthia, then another space would be available too!" Danny's nostrils flared once again as he snapped at Bennett's words.

"It would make the morning worse. Let Cynthia, *your wife*, stay asleep." Bennett bluntly opposed. "Now then, Cronen, I have something to ask of you. Since you are taking care of the girl, I ask you to stand guard over her."

"…Stand guard?"

Not nurse her, but stand guard. Cronen knit his brows at the uncomfortable feeling of the words.

"Yes, stand guard. It's very unlikely… but just in case they actually are thieves."

Seeing Bennett's serious expression, Danny and Cronen naturally became tense too.

"Even a young girl like her could set fire to the village if she isn't watched. Cronen, you are strong and you are skilled. For argument's sake, even if she is a thief, as long as you're there, you could control her."

"Of course, I can't lose to a girl like her," brimming with confidence Cronen nodded.

"Hmm. With that appearance, if she actually had that much energy, then her acting is top-class, but…" Bennett recalled the image of the girl's condition, held in Kei's arms, and muttered quietly, "Well, it's fine. As for Kei, we'll treat him like any other visitor and invite him to my house. And to be safe, I'll call Mandel to guard us.

"Mandel… is coming to our place?" Danny openly wore an expression of distaste.

"There's no helping it. Is there anyone more skilled than Mandel in this village? He has brute strength and incredible marksmanship."

"Well… you're right."

Danny reluctantly acknowledged it, but his unpleasant expression showed he was still unsatisfied. However, Bennett didn't so much as acknowledge his childish protest. He simply informed them of the decision with a serious expression. "That's how it is. Neither of you press them for information. They have their reasons for keeping quiet. It is best if we don't get involved, whatever those reasons may be. Be as polite as you can, take care of them without prejudice, and provide for them what you can. We want them to leave as soon as possible. Don't forget even a single thing I just said."

"Yes."

"Understood."

At any rate, Bennett nodded a few times at his sons' understanding.

"—Now then," Bennett turned, and while hitting his crooked back, smiled. "I can't have the visitors waiting forever. I should go receive them."

He slowly began walking towards where his uninvited guests waited, like a kind, amiable old man.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

Nogawa-dono[1]: The plan was always to keep honorifics, there just haven't been any until this point.

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8. The Reaper

“Please take a seat. We’ll prepare some of our village’s smoked pork.”

Danny, the oldest son, wore an ingratiating smile and placed a plate covered with meat on the table. The change from his earlier haughty attitude was so great that Kei almost laughed.

Bennett said, “This is quite tasty,” as he picked up a knife and began carving it up. “And this here is some wine made from the grapes of a neighboring village. It’s been aged almost eleven years. In recent years, it has not turned out very well. Please, give it a try.”

“…I appreciate it.”

Danny set a full goblet of wine in front of Kei.

This much was to be expected of that devious old man and his son. They weren’t overly pushy and managed to avoid creating an awkward atmosphere; truly splendid coordination between them. It gave off the impression that they were used to entertaining guests. Treating someone who showed up suddenly this late at night as skillfully as they have made it feel as if they had a great deal of practice.

…Although, I wonder if it will be alright if I drink this.

Kei involuntarily picked up the goblet and hesitated for a single moment, gazing at the red liquid as it swirled around inside.

The only alcohol that Kei had ever consumed was limited to amazake[1].

…Well, I’ve had drinks in game before, and with this *body it should be fine.*

No matter how much he pretended to enjoy the smell it would be strange if he didn’t drink it. Suddenly, he drank with determination. The sourness of the grapes and the taste of alcohol spread through his mouth.

“…”

“How is it?”

Danny and Bennett watched Kei with their heads slightly inclined. They certainly didn’t look alike, however, seeing their smiles made him think they were father and son after all.

“…It tastes very nice, it’s easy to drink.”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it.”

They seemed to be relieved by Kei’s answer, but this was probably an act as well. Danny and the village mayor

exchanged glances.

That was close, I almost choked there.

The alcohol content of the wine was quite low, but the fact that he wasn't used to alcohol hadn't changed. He felt like gagging.

He was somehow able to get used to it as he rolled it around in his mouth, so drinking it little by little was fine, but he couldn't drink it like a cup of juice.

"If you try some after the meat, the flavor will change." Bennett smoothly placed generous pieces of meat in front of Kei.

Since coming to this world, he still hadn't eaten anything; he'd only had water, a healing potion, and wine. Now aware of his hunger, he gratefully picked up a piece of meat.

"Ohh, this is…"

The good, concentrated flavor of the pork with a perfect amount fat danced on his tongue as the smoky smell tickled his nose. It was a little too salty, but then, if he drank a little wine at the same time, the flavor really did change, just as Bennett suggested. Using the alcohol to wash down the rather strong flavor of the fat left in his mouth was satisfying!

Something that VR technology couldn't replicate; the real sense of taste.

After having been able to savor something he hadn't in a long time, he felt emotionally moved as he smacked his lips.

"…Hey, mayor," a deep voice reverberated next to the relaxed Kei. "I want to ask something… Why did you call *me* for this?" The good looking man, Mandel, inquired as he faced the village mayor and sleepily rubbed his eyes.

"__"

A brief moment of silence. Kei felt feeble bloodlust from the smiling Bennett who held a knife in his hand.

"…What, from what I heard, Kei-dono was attacked by thieves. Also, it seems it happened not too far from here. You're the most skilled fighter in the village, so just to be sure, I wanted you to be a part of our talks."

"…I see." Satisfied with his answer, Mandel, still wearing a sleepy expression, proceeded to glance over at the meat in front of Kei. "I'm hungry. Do you mind if I have some too… Kei-dono?"

"Sure, I don't mind. Also, you can just call me Kei."

"…Thanks."

The two ate their fill of smoked meat. Eating by himself felt awkward, so Kei welcomed Mandel. Mandel seemed untroubled with joining in.

"Hm… This certainly makes me want to drink," was the first thing to come out of his mouth after wolfing down the meat.

Danny pressed on his brow as if he had a headache, and next to him the corners of Bennett's never-changing smile twitched.

Bennett ignored Mandel magnificently and asked, "Well… now, would you mind sharing with us the story of these

thieves, Kei-dono?”

“Of course, but I ran away immediately so I don’t have too many details.”

Kei took sips of the wine as he summarized the attack. The place, their numbers, and their equipment and proficiency.

“…’Hound Wolf’?”

Everyone present listened quietly, but once Kei mentioned that a tamed wolf had chased him, the color drained from their faces.

“…Ah. I killed two of them. One got lucky but its nose was crushed, so I don’t think it came all the way to the village.”

Kei assumed that they were afraid of their tracking ability with their sense of smell, so he tried to alleviate their fears, but the faces of the mayor and his son remained dark. Even Mandel stopped eating and wore a serious expression.

It feels like I stepped on a landmine.

The atmosphere around them had become heavy.

“Is something wrong with the Hound Wolves?”

“N-no… taming them is difficult; if a band of thieves used them, well, that means… right?”

Bennett and Danny exchanged looks wearing awkward smiles as if saying, *you understand, right?*

Even if you look at me like that…

I don’t understand, I don’t know.

Kei honestly had no idea. He’d only arrived in this world mere hours ago. There’s no way that he would know about the thieves or other circumstances.

“…『The Ignaz Thieves』,” whispered Mandel in a low voice with his arms crossed.

“…”

“Certainly, you must know of them?”

He hesitated, trying to decide between pretending to know and outright asking about them, but Bennett saw through him.

“It’s embarrassing, but I’ve never heard of them.”

“What…“

“That…“

Taken aback, the father and son looked at each other.

“The Ignaz Thieves are a large group that operates out of the center of Ri’leir. As of late, they’ve been quieter but… even so, their reach is huge. Even now, they seem to have their hands on some feudal lords… Around here, there isn’t anyone that doesn’t know them,” Mandel quietly explained with a serious expression.

The question, *where did you come from*, was vaguely implied, but Bennett and Danny couldn’t read between the

lines and wore baffled expressions. It was obvious from the faint bloodlust being directed at Mandel that they didn't appreciate being left out of the conversation like this. The fact that they managed to keep their expressions neutral in spite of this was impressive.

That aside, something bothered Kei. "This area is Ri'leir?"

Mandel made a strange face at his question, but nodded an affirmative.

The Ri'leir area.

In the game, that referred to the entire southwestern region of the map.

It encompassed the plains, the meadows, the hills, the woods, and other such abundantly green terrain, the stronghold Urvan, the port city Kitene, and other important grounds for activity. It could even be said to be Kei's home.

"…Village mayor. I apologize for asking something strange, but…"

"Yes…?"

"Could you please tell me the name of a large town near here?"

"Town, huh?" Bennett folded him arms and exhaled audibly in thought.

Danny raised a finger and answered in his place, "Satyna, perhaps…"

As expected, Kei hadn't heard of it before. His face fell.

"And also, if you go north, there is Urvan."

"Urvan!?" Kei's reaction to Bennett's latter words was quite the opposite. The other three tensed up in shock at Kei's loud voice.

"Ah, excuse me, I lost my composure. Urvan… it's a stronghold—", he was about to say 'village', but stopped himself because something felt odd. *…I thought I asked them to tell me of a large town.*

In the game, Urvan was certainly large for a village constructed by players, but it was small when compared to the NPC towns that were in the game to begin with.

Danny nodded, "Yes."'

"—It's the *fortified city* Urvan."

It took a few seconds for things to sink in.

"…Fortified *city*?"

"Yes, fortified city."

"…Not a stronghold village?"

Bennett and Danny both let out a laugh.

"Hahaha… That's quite amusing. If Urvan were a village then we would be something like a dog house."

"No, seriously. It would be absurd to compare our size and population to theirs."

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

amazake[1] : “Amazake is a traditional sweet, low- or non-alcohol (depending on recipes) Japanese drink made from fermented rice.” -Quoted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazake

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The two of them waved their hands back and forth as if to say, *no, no*.

It seemed that, unlike the game, Urvan's scope had changed to that of a city.

Kei rocked the goblet back and forth as he thought. If Urvan exists then that means—

"In that case, if you head straight west there is a port town called Kitene, right?"

"Yes. You are aware of 'Port City Kitene', Kei-dono? I've only visited it a few times, but it was a good city. Especially the pleasure quarter." Danny made a lewd expression and he gave a dirty chuckle.

Kei quickly looked away from the plump man's disgusting smile. "Village mayor, if it's not too much trouble, could you show me a map of the area?"

"A map… Please wait one moment." Bennett stood up with a grunt, picked up the candlestick on the table, and disappeared to the far end of the room. "…Unfortunately, we only have a roughly sketched one."

"That's fine."

Kei took the parchment from Bennett and spread it out over the table.

"…I see."

It certainly was a *rough* one.

It must have been sketched quite some time ago. With Tahfu as the center of the map, roughly sketched topological features were drawn of the surrounding area. Also, various locations such as castles and houses were marked throughout the map.

"To the east of here is Satyna, huh. The castle in the north is Urvan, and the port in the west is Kitene… This house mark here is a nearby village?"

"Yes."

"…How far is it? A rough idea is fine."

"About… huh. It probably wouldn't take more than half a day to walk to the town of Satyna in the east. Kitene is double the distance so it would take a full day.

"Hm…I see. Thank you." Kei once again dropped his gaze to the map.

If it took half a day to walk from Tahfu to Satyna and a full day to Kitene, then after taking into consideration various towns and their distances, walking to Urvan, which was kind of far to the north, should take around three days.

Of course, since there are obstacles such as mountains, valleys, and forests on the way, it would take a little extra time to actually get there.

He measured the distance between the fortified city Urvan and the port city Kitene on the map.

“It looks like walking from Urvan to Kitene should take about three or four days.”

“According to the map, yes, it would.”

“This is just what I was told by a peddler’s bodyguard but, according to him, it would only take half a day by horse if you galloped,” Danny butted in after coming back to his senses.

The necessary time to travel between Urvan and Kitene by horse was exactly what Kei wanted to know the most.

“I see, thank you.” While rubbing his chin he thought to himself, *the scale of things certainly are larger than when this was a game…*

A stronghold village became a fortified city, a port town became a port city, and a thirty minute journey by horse became a half day journey.

The interesting thing about travelling by horse is that, just because the travelling time was twenty-four times longer, doesn’t necessarily mean that the map became twenty-four times larger.

A large gap in travel potential appears between a horse and an automobile since the horse cannot maintain its top speed for long periods of time.

In the game, to speak to a bowser horse’s performance, Mikazuki and Sasuke were able to continue galloping at a regular horse’s pace for thirty minutes nonstop. The fastest a regular horse can gallop is 30KPH. Therefore in the game, the actual distance between Urvan and Kitene was a little less than fifteen kilometers.

However, no horse, even a bowser horse, can maintain a gallop for an entire half day. They need breaks and slower speeds at times in order to maintain a decent pace. Taking such impediments into consideration, the distance between Urvan and Kitene in *this world* is slightly over 150 kilometers.

In other words, the scale of this world was most likely tenfold that of the game world.

If the 『Demondal』 map expanded tenfold…then this place is probably, at most, the size of the British Isles?

The British Isles. It was difficult for a horse to go across that vast land, but even then, from the perspective of it being the whole *world* it was much too small.

If this place is a parallel world that appears similar to 『Demondal』, then areas which had been out of bounds due to limits imposed by the game, should now be accessible. Even the ocean and places behind mountain ranges.

“…” Hesitant to say anything to Kei who had kept silent and wore a worried expression, the room remained silent.

Kei thought to himself things such as, *Once Aileen recovers, first we ought to head over to the scaled up Urvan to check it out…*

“—“

He snapped his head up after hearing a faint voice from outside, “…Someone’s coming.”

Mandel and Kei both noticed it at the same time and turned their attention to the door behind them.

They could hear the light sound of someone’s footsteps as they half ran toward the village leader’s house.

“—Pardon me!” The door was roughly shoved open and crashed into the wall with a loud bang.

Just outside, a young, freckled girl with an ashen face stood breathing heavily.

“Tina, why are you in such a panic?”

“Mayor! There’s a huge problem!” She shouted hysterically in response to Bennett, before suddenly turning to Kei, “Traveler! It’s bad, please come quickly!! Right now!” Looking as if she was about to cry, she tried to forcefully pull Kei outside by the sleeve.

“W-wait a second, Tina! Just what is going on?!” Roared Bennett.

The frantic girl paused for a moment to say, “The girl he brought with him, Aileen-sama…” she timidly looked at Kei, “She—she isn’t breathing!”

† † †

Kei felt the color drain from his face and broke into a run. “Aileen!” He smashed into the small room, shoving the door open with a bang.

Inside were two people. Aileen, laying on a small bed, and Cronen, looking flustered and shaken up in front of her.

“Move!!” He violently shoved the confused Cronen away and rushed to Aileen. “Aileen…! Hey, pull yourself together, Aileen!”

He lightly hit her cheeks, but there was no response. He held his hand in front of her mouth, but he didn’t feel her breath.

Now bathed in the warm candle light, Aileen’s face was paper white. It felt unpleasant; she looked just like a doll. He smacked her chest with his hand.

It can’t be. Why. Her face didn’t look good, but the wound should already be completely healed, “—Fuck!!”

He pressed his ear to the left side of her chest. “…” No sound… no. *Bathump*, it was a beat so small it seemed as if it would disappear at any moment.

“She’s still alive…!” He felt around in her waist pouch and pulled out a small potion. Calming his impatient, shaking hands, he removed the cork and poured it into her mouth.

After a few seconds, “…Kehu!” Aileen grimaced and moved slightly, choking on the liquid. Her cheeks turned a faint red once again.

“Wha-, she revived…!?” Croaked an astonished voice from Cronen, who looked as if he’d just seen a miracle of God.

Kei turned, piercing him with a sharp glare. “…You bastard, what did you do?”

Kei’s voice carried a penetrating cold that felt as if it came from the depths of hell; the air itself seemed to crackle with his bloodlust. Cronen began trembling and fearfully stammered, “I-I didn’t do anything!!”

In reality, he really didn’t do *anything*; either to hurt her or to help her.

“I-I just, she was sweating so, you know, she had a fever too, I was trying to bring it down with a wet cloth…” He showed Kei the small wet towel in his hand. Flustered, Cronen continued, “It w-was really only a short time! She didn’t look too good to begin with, but after stepping away for a moment she got weaker and weaker… By the time Tina left to call for you her breathing was already almost…”

Kei regained some composure after witnessing Cronen's dismay, and while giving Aileen more potion he reconsidered the situation, *it looks like he didn't do anything bad to her*.

"…Sorry. I got a little upset."

"No, it's fine if you understand…"

Relieved from the pressure of Kei's bloodlust, Cronen sighed and relaxed.

…Regardless, why did this happen?

Involuntarily, Kei bit into his lower lip. Her complexion was returning but sweat began to bead up on her forehead again causing doubts to well up once more.

Her wound healed completely. That's for sure.

He reached into his quiver and pulled out the arrow she'd been hit with to examine it. There was no way that the arrowhead broke off and was still inside her.

Maybe she needs more potions? No, drinking one bottle should restore full HP. Driving one to the verge of death, even after fully healing—

—Driving one to the verge of death.

Kei suddenly raised his head to stare at the assailant's arrow clenched in his right hand.

"—Really now, just what is going on this late at night?"

"—Sorry, but it is what it is."

Outside had suddenly become noisy.

The door squeaked open and an old woman wearing a robe and holding a cane came in. "Really, a traveler, how botherso—Hiieeiieiieee!!!"

As soon as the old woman who had been complaining walked in and met Kei's gaze, she lost her balance, and fell over backwards.

"Anka-san, what's wrong?!"

"N-nothing, this…" Ignoring the panicking Cronen who rushed to her side, she opened her eyes and a look of fright appeared on her wrinkled face.

"What's wrong, old woman?" Bennett came into the room just after her, looking slightly worn out.

"T-they are the travelers, Bennett?"

"Yes, yes… Kei-dono, this old woman is our village's shaman."

"Heheheh, shaman is a bit of an overstatement, I just specialize in curses. My name is Anka, I am pleased to make your acquaintance…traveler." The old shaman woman shakily stood up with Cronen's help, and unsteadily approached the bed. "…What in the world happened to this young girl?"

"Well…" Cronen described the situation roughly.

"Hm…traveler, do you have any insight on this?"

“…A little while ago she was shot by a thief’s arrow.” He handed the arrow to the old woman.

“This… However, I don’t see any trace of a wound…”

“It was here.” Kei indicated Aileen’s chest to the old woman, who looked perplexed as she gently brushed the arrow. There was new, white skin left as a scar from using the potion to heal her. “I used this to heal her.”

“That’s…!?”

The bottle he held still contained a small amount of the blue liquid. Anka gasped, transfixed by the sight.

“It seems you’re familiar with it. It’s a High Potion.”

“A High Potion!!” Anka loudly parroted back at him and once again weakly fell to the floor. “…Please don’t startle me so, traveler. I thought my heart was going to stop.”

“O-oh, sorry…”

Aileen’s complexion worsened slightly, without a moment’s delay he dribbled more of the potion into her mouth as he thought to himself that a High Potion wasn’t something to be that surprised about.

Almost in a moan Anka said, “Although, this arrow and these symptoms…” She wiped some of the sweat off of Aileen’s forehead and put it in her mouth. “…Bitter. It seems pretty likely it was the Ignaz… I see.” She suddenly turned her attention to Kei, “This traveler,” correcting herself, “This girl’s condition…I believe the arrow was poisoned.”

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

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